MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

FANTASY

Magazine
Issue #25

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An Interview with
Ray Nelson

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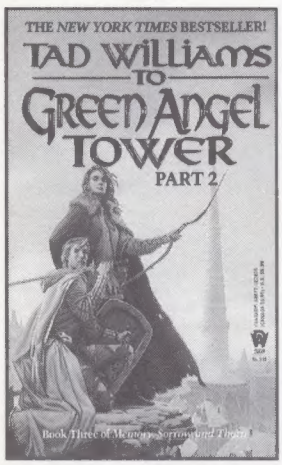

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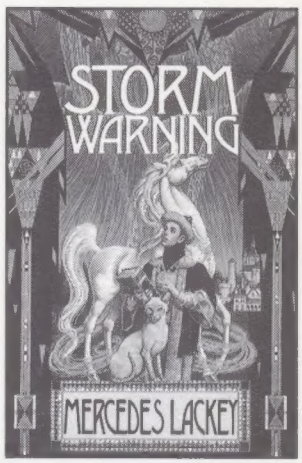

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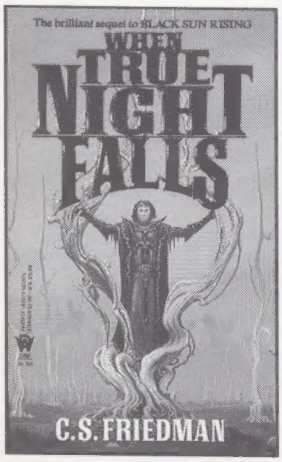

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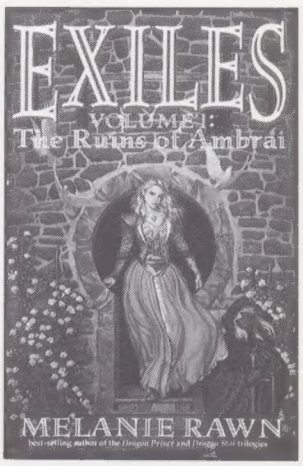

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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY
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EDITORIAL

I'd like to extend a special welcome this issue to all our new subscribers. Two thousand of you have responded to a mailing we did recently to women members of the Science Fiction Book Club. Thanks to all of you, and I hope you enjoy what you read here.

A question that's often been asked is whether we sell, rent, or otherwise make our mailing list available.

In a word, no.

Why not? Let me share with you some of the weirder things that have gone bump in my mailbox.

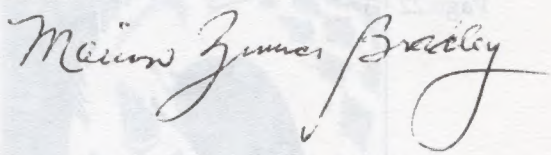
Among the craziest was something addressed to my box number, rather, to "OCCUPANT".

You know those advertisements which purport to find your family genealogy? Well, this was one of those; it said it would trace the long history of the OCCUPANT family! The OCCUPANTS, so said the writer, had given the nation many important people, composers, statesmen, etc.

Then, of course, there was the letter from Sears, telling me to visualize how impressed my neighbors would be when they saw the lovely vinyl siding that Sears installed on my residence at P.O. Box 249. My neighbors might be impressed, all right, but I'll bet the Post Office wouldn't care for it.

And there's the fan mail. I particularly remember one sixteen-page letter (at least it was typed) from a man who claimed I had been meeting him on the astral plane. I wrote back and explained that I didn't meet strange men on the astral plane — my husband wouldn't like it. Mail like that is why I have a P.O. Box, which is a precaution I would recommend to any fantasy writer.

So I have a firm policy with regard to the names, addresses, and phone numbers in my care: I don't give them out. If people want to write fan letters to my writers or artists, they can send them to the magazine and we will forward them. But, regardless of whether you are a writer, an artist, or a subscriber, we aren't going to tell anyone where you live.

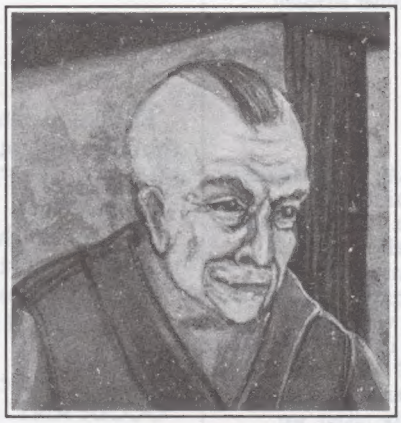


MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

FANTASY Magazine

Issue 25 Fall 1994

Page 45



Page 17

Cover Story

The Masterpainter 4

by Diana L. Paxson; art by Jill Bauman

How many stories begin with a scene in a bar? This one is different!

The Witch's Familiar 13

by Linda Dunn

Which is the witch?

Things Are Not Always As They Seem 14

by George Morrow; art by Margaret Organ-Kean

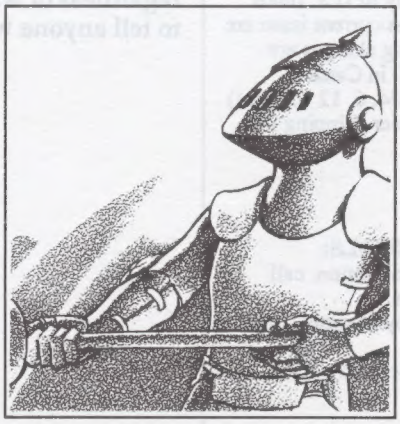
Or are they?

The Spell Game 17

by Jennifer Ashley; art by Gail Butler

A witch must protect her own sister.

Page 22



Page 57

What Dragons Prefer 22
by Dayle A. Dermatis; art by Margaret Organ-Kean
This dragon might want something unanticipated.

Dreambreaker 24
by Wilda Gretzinger; art by Lori Deitrick
What are dreams worth?

Pennies for a Princess 27
by Ryan G. Van Cleave; art by Elizabeth Hope Shaw
Good things come in small packages!

The Potion Maker 30
by Quinn Weller; art by Dameon Willich
When dealing with a sorceress, maybe coins aren't enough.

Away He Run 34
by Camille Allen LaGuire; art by Bing Burnham
All choices have a price.

Firecrackers 36
by Tim Miller; art by James Balkovek
A boy finds a way to make some dreams come true.

One Summer 45
by Michael Johnson; art by Allison Fiona Hershey
A quick jump into another world — of fantasy.

On the Holy Mountain 52
by Darrell Schweitzer; art by George Barr
This is where a quest can lead —

How can you deal with —

A Dragon on the Premises 57
by John P. Buentello; art by George Barr

The Beginning of Tears 60
by Steven Piziks; art by Adrian Bourne
Where do you find magic?

Once Upon a Passion 63
by Devon Monk; art by Dameon Willich
Study your spellcraft lessons carefully!

Regular Features

Marion Zimmer Bradley
Talks to Writers: The One Reason for Rejection 50
Writers Talk Back: Shooting the Sacred Cows 51
by Parke Godwin
Interview with Ray Nelson 40
by Darrell Schweitzer
Letters to the Editor 56
Results of the Cauldron 44
The Last Word 63
by Rachel E. Holmen
The Cauldron 64

Artist: Jill Bauman

The Masterpainter

by Diana L. Paxson

Tomar ran through the back streets of Neri. It was only a medium-sized town in one of the more obscure provinces of the Empire of Bindir, but it was set where the river Galia joined the Dard. The wharves that served the trade route east through the mountains attracted the dregs of the thinly settled lands behind the frontier. Tomar avoided the garbage, inanimate or human, that clogged the alleys without really seeing it, wondering how he was going to tell Dergalla that all their hopes for marrying were gone.

Dergalla's father had promised her hand, and his fortune, to the artist who took the prize at the Midsummer Festival, but a young painter's chances of becoming famous were small. Dergalla deserved more than he would ever be able to give her even if he won.

And now he could not even compete for the prize.

Only craftmasters and the journeymen they sponsored could enter the contest. Master Sembul's name had not been on the list posted on the Palace Gates, and when Tomar had gone to tell the old man he must register by noon, he had found him lost in an opium dream. How, knowing what the contest meant to Tomar, could his master have betrayed him this way?

At that moment any half-fledged pickpocket could have fleeced him. But even in the River Quarter, a skinny young man in flapping slippers and patched breeches whose paint-stained shirt had clearly seen better days was hardly worth the energy it would take to shake him down.

He turned eastward without slackening pace as the morning light blinded him, and ran full tilt into someone standing there. For one amazed moment he was flying, then he crashed into a wall with a force that drove the breath from his lungs. It took a few moments for things to come into focus again.

There was a body in the road. Still dizzy with reaction, Tomar started towards him. Brushes and little pots of color were spilled across the road. He stopped short again, staring. The victim's clothes were Bindiri, and good quality, though not new. As their owner groaned and pushed himself upright, a gold chain flashed beneath his full, graying beard. He rubbed his balding head and swore.

"What in the name of the Triple Harmas possessed you not to look before you stepped into the road?" said Tomar defensively.

The stranger raised one eyebrow. "Harmas? Possessed?" The gleam in his eyes was oddly disconcerting. Tomar found he could not stir until those keen eyes had completed their assessment, and flushed to the roots of his fair hair.

"I'm Master Roneyn," the man added then, "from the capital. I'm an artist, and so, I think, are you —"

Tomar felt the high color drain from his face as he remembered his lost hopes. "Only a journeyman," he answered flatly, "apprenticed to Master Sembul the Limner. I'm sorry I knocked you down —" The words stuck in his throat and he held out his hand.

The Bindiri waved it away. Tomar bent to get the scattered paints, but the other man was already sweeping them back into their box. He stood up with surprising flexibility, brushing dust from his clothes.

"I could use a drink — if you want to make amends, show me a place where we can wet our throats —"

Tomar frowned. "There's the Centaur..." he said slowly. "It's only a common inn, but they've honest wine."

Tomar suppressed a grimace as the coarse red wine went down, and replaced his mug on the table. "What were y'doing in the Beggar's Quarter anyway? Not your part of town!" Dimly he realized the question was impertinent, but though the Centaur's wine was sour to the tongue it lit a comforting fire in the belly. This early, the tavern was almost deserted, the only other customers two soldiers just off night-guard, who were drinking to the Empire's recent victory over the Arhini

Mountain Tribes.

"I was heading back to the wharves after registering for the Arts Competition at your Summer Festival."

Tomar choked on his wine.

"They said it was open to strangers," the Bindiri said mildly.

"Yes — yes, 'tis, and better y'have Dergalla than Master — bastar' Bek. Y'look like a good man!"

"I don't understand —"

In the shadows all Tomar could see of Roneyn's face was the eyes, but they sparkled with a life that held his gaze. Suddenly the sorrow he had tried to drown welled through.

"It should've been just a competition, like every year. But Dergalla's father — that's Kildon the Coppersmith — thinks folk'll take him more seriously if he's got an artist in the family, so he's goin' to marry off his daughter to the masterpainter who wins the prize."

"And you love her..." Roneyn's voice was very gentle now.

Tomar fought down a sob. "Yes, an' Dergalla loves me, though only Ytarra herself could say why. All I have to offer is here —" he stretched out his thin, paint-stained fingers and flexed them convulsively. He was sobering rapidly now.

"There's a man called Bek who wants Dergalla too — pompous, pot-bellied fool with a showy style. The nobles all buy his stuff, an' Dergalla's father likes him. The contest is the only chance I have to win her, and my master is too drugged to enter my name, so I won't even be able to try!" Suddenly it was too much, and Tomar covered his face so that the other man would not see him cry.

After a time he straightened and managed a weak smile.

"Thank you for listening. I'm sorry I knocked you down."

Roneyn smiled. "Now I understand why you were running. And there is something you can do for me. I have business of my own in Neri, and I entered my name in the competition mainly to give a reason for my presence here. But I certainly don't need a bride! If you are willing, I will sponsor you."

In a chamber in the Temple of Triple Harmas, patron of magic, the high priest lay suspended in the warded reverie that served for sleep with his kind. In that state he should have been protected not only from physical intrusion but even from dreams, therefore he was all the more astonished when a figure shaped itself out of the dim veils that surrounded him.

A Voice spoke a name which no one in Neri should have known.

The high priest fought his way towards consciousness, but the formlessness which he himself had summoned bound him.

His name was called again.

"You should have reported at the Equinox, and it is almost Midsummer —" the Voice went on. "Did you think that because the Empire's energies are committed to the Mountain War that the Order had forgotten you?"

As if the high priest's stunned silence had been resistance, the Voice sharpened. "I am your Senior — do you deny it?" A Symbol flared suddenly between them, and the lesser adept stifled a cry.

"I've been busy! It's all I can do to control —"

"It seems to have been more than you can do —" the Voice corrected him. "There are abuses here. You will correct them!"

"Master, please — I will try —"

"You will succeed, or test the mercy of those demons to whom your own oath binds you. I will be watching you."

"Watching — but where —" Abruptly his wards and the limbo they had guarded disappeared and he found himself sprawled naked on his own lavishly carpeted floor.

"Yes, of course you should be grateful to Master Roneyn for sponsoring you, but that doesn't mean you trust him!" Dergalla stopped short, forcing the pulsing traffic of the Festival to swirl around them. "There's no *reason* for him to befriend you!"

"He's an artist!"

Dergalla raised one eyebrow, and Tomar's fingers twitched with desire to paint that arching dash of gold against her rosy skin. She was wearing a sky-colored tunic that deepened the blue of her eyes, drawn up through the sash that accented the sweet curve between her swelling hips and the generous line of her breasts to display a brightly striped petticoat.

"And is Master Bek also your brother?"

Tomar started to reply with a phrase he had learned on the wharves, remembered who he was talking to and produced an inarticulate garble that made her laugh. It was difficult to focus on the argument when the sunlight turned her hair to living gold and her scent made the blood pulse in his veins.

As if his name had called him, Master Bek himself was coming towards them, shadowed by the black figure of Mirrakin, second priest of the Temple of Harmas. Tomar and Dergalla eased gently backward into the alley between the rows.

The Festival grounds had been laid out in the open space between the Jeweler's Quarter and the remains of the city wall, and most of the spaces were occupied. Jugglers and sword swallowers worked the corners. Side by side with sellers of Dorian silk or fine vintages from Teyn, the craftsmen of Neri displayed their wares.

"How could this Bindiri master know you were worth sponsoring?" Dergalla turned to face him.

They had stopped before one of the open-air stages. It bore only a chair and table, making it impossible to guess what period or place was being represented. The costume of the lady who had just entered was hardly more helpful, being designed mainly to set off her personal attractions. She was speaking to an older man who sat banging away rather unconvincingly at a shoe.

"He hasn't seen your work —" Dergalla went on. "Unless he has some other reason to help you, he is taking an awful chance."

"He did say he had other business here," Tomar answered slowly. "But I'd swear he means me no harm."

They moved closer to the stage, and suddenly the voice of the actress came clearly, low and thrilling with appeal.

"And might not a widower win my hand?"

"My child, but think — he'd be too old for you —" the cobbler replied.

"How so, too old? It is Art that matters here. Let him who understands it set to woo!" The girl answered with some spirit, and Tomar felt the words strike home.

He turned to Dergalla, torn between the need to reassure her and the fear that a man like Master Roneyn might reassure her only too well.

"The only harm he might do me is to fall in love with you himself! I have seen some of his drawings, and he *is* a master — his lines flow onto the page with never a need for erasing —" He gestured in frustration, unable to find

words for the way the assurance of Master Roneyn's work affected him. "Dergalla, if Bek were to win you I would kill *him*, but if it were Roneyn, I would kill myself, and never know if it was because I couldn't equal his work or because I had lost *you*!"

The actors finished their scene and exited to general applause. Dergalla stood with her hands on her hips, emotions chasing across her face like clouds building up for a storm.

"Artists!" She exploded into speech as the clapping died down. "Am I no more than something to inspire you?"

"Dergalla —" Tomar ducked as her arm came around.

"I will marry where I choose and be damned to you, and my father, and them all! I hope your Master Roneyn does come to court me so I can tell him no!" The last words came over her shoulder as she strode away.

Tomar and Master Roneyn had just finished a meal of sausages, local goat cheese, and pickled mushrooms when the attack began. As if he had heard Dergalla's criticism, Roneyn had noted that if he were to sponsor Tomar he ought to give him some instruction. A little gold had settled matters with Master Sembul — Tomar was Roneyn's journeyman now, and the two had been at work since dawn.

At first, it was not clear what was happening. To Tomar it seemed as if something he had eaten had disagreed with him; the colors on his canvas merged and whirled. Then they exploded suddenly into whorls of burning sparks that spiraled outward; his laboring vision was overwhelmed by the brilliance and he fell into the dark.

When he came to his senses, Master Roneyn was bending over him. He opened his lips as a cup touched them and found himself abruptly wide awake as the hot, spicy liquid went down.

"What happened?"

"Well, I don't know much about your local wizards, but it felt like a paralysis spell..." Roneyn replied. He looked remarkably unruffled. "Do you have any enemies?"

"Me?" Tomar squeaked. Since he had grown nimble enough to outrun street gangs no one had considered him worth attacking.

"Master Bek, for instance?"

"I wouldn't have thought the Beak considered me enough threat to —" Tomar broke off, "unless he saw me with Dergalla at the Festival. He was with that priest, Mirrakin. It's possible..."

The thought that someone might actually spend money to have him killed amazed him, and why with magic? A man with a knife would have been so much cheaper than a wizard, and so much easier to hire.

"Are *you* all right?" Tomar looked at his benefactor. The lines in Roneyn's browned face seemed to have deepened, but no cloud troubled his serenity.

"Oh yes," he said calmly. "I think you took the brunt of it."

Rather unsteadily, Tomar got to his feet. From his canvas, an unfinished figure that was meant to be Dergalla looked back at him. He frowned. He had been trying to paint her as Ytarra, goddess of love and spring, but all he saw now was lines, as if the magic had knocked out his vision.

"It's no good —" He put the paintbrush down.

"What do you mean?"

"If I could tell you, maybe I could fix it! It's just not Dergalla!"

"Is an exact likeness what you want? Is that what you think art is?" The soft voice with its slight accent held no emotion, yet Tomar felt the judgment there.

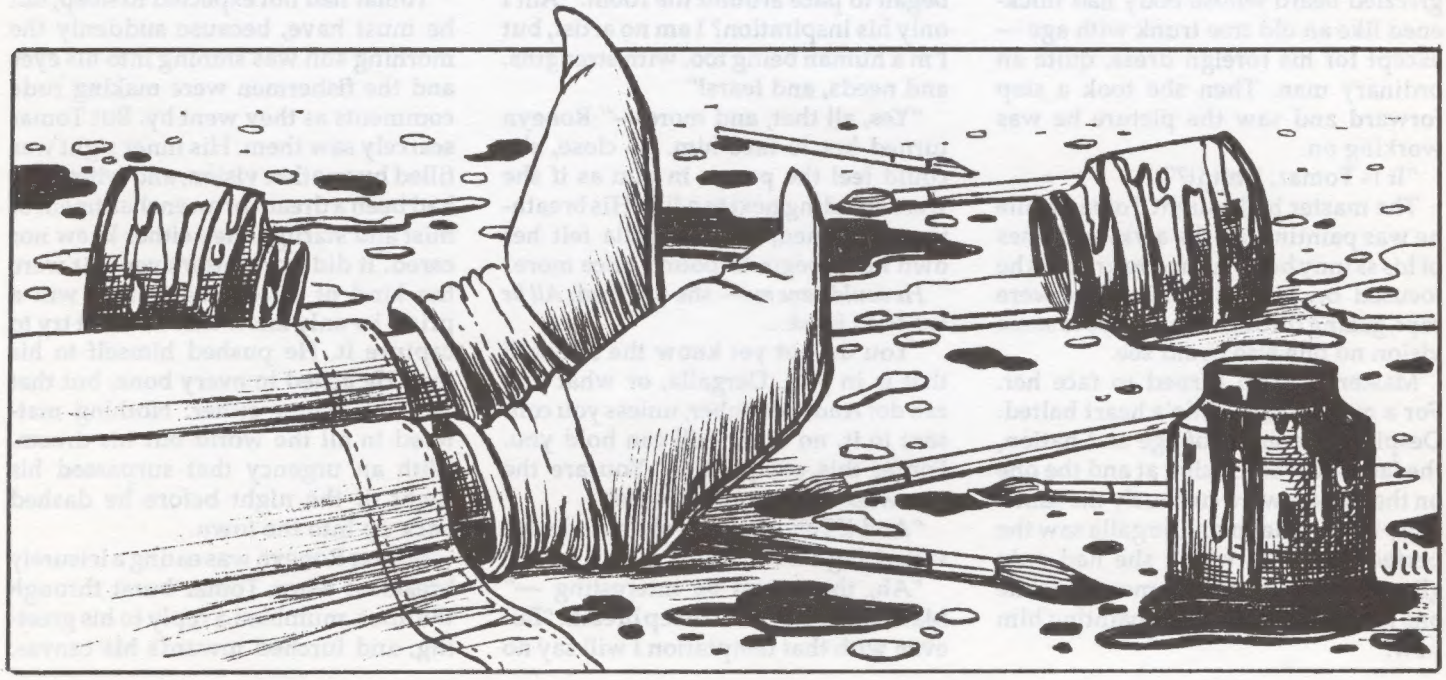
"Yes! No!" He shook his head in confusion. "I don't mean what she looks like, but what she *is* like — what it is about her that makes me want to put the world on my canvas and create everything anew!"

"But what you were painting was not new —" Roneyn's gesture took in the stylized iconography of cows and cats by which the figure was surrounded.

"Pictures of Ytarra always have that sort of thing, or how would people know who She was? You have to obey the rules."

"True, but you must do something more. If the painting makes people feel the way you feel about your beloved, then they will know who it is, for she will be Ytarra for them as well..."

Tomar glared at him, remembering how he had struggled to learn the conventions of formal painting. Master



Artist: Jill Bauman

Roneyn said nothing, and Tomar realized that he might as well have tried to be angry at a tree. Unwillingly his gaze returned to the canvas.

The work remained as pointless as before. Even Bek's slick and sentimental productions looked livelier. This was not a prize painting; it would never win Dergalla. Nor should it—*nor should it!* With a groan Tomar snatched up the big brush, plunged it into the pot of white gesso and slapped it downward again and again. When tears blurred the mess, he dropped the brush and stumbled towards the door. Roneyn was speaking but he could not understand the words. As he pushed blindly down the stairs Tomar did not know if he were weeping for the loss of his love, or of his dream.

Dergalla's maid stationed herself on the stone bench in front of Master Roneyn's rooms, still protesting. Dergalla let the words flow over her. Risky though this visit might be, it was safer than sending a messenger. She was less strictly watched since she had agreed to become the equivalent of an engraved prize platter, and if her father found out where she had gone, what more could he do to her?

Still she hesitated, suddenly shy of this stranger who would be used to Imperial court ladies with wasp waists and painted eyes. Then a squeak from her maid told her someone was coming, and she started up the stairs.

At first she saw Master Roneyn as Tomar had — a short man with a full grizzled beard whose body had thickened like an old tree trunk with age — except for his foreign dress, quite an ordinary man. Then she took a step forward and saw the picture he was working on.

"It is Tomar, isn't it?"

The master had caught Tomar while he was painting, all the awkward lines of his skinny body turned to grace as he focused on his work. His eyes were rapt, gazing through the canvas to some vision no one else could see.

Master Roneyn turned to face her. For a moment Dergalla's heart halted. Despite differences of age and nation, the face she was looking at and the one on the canvas were curiously the same. Only in the older man Dergalla saw the perfected power which she had only glimpsed in Tomar at moments like the one in which Roneyn was painting him now.

"Do you think so?" the Bindiri's voice rumbled as if it came from somewhere beneath their feet. "Then perhaps you are the right woman for him after all..."

As he returned her smile, his eyes glowed, and Dergalla wondered how he was seeing her.

"Am I?" Abruptly she remembered the news she had come to bring. "It may not matter. I've seen Master Bek's painting, and I don't think there's any way Tomar can win."

"Is the picture so wonderful?" Roneyn eased back onto the painting stool and the gray beard quivered with a little smile. His lips were firm, and somehow, Dergalla knew that beneath that luxuriance of beard was a strong chin.

"It is —" she said honestly. "The colors glow like liquid jewels and the figures seem to move. But that's not why it's going to win. Bek has painted Toyur himself crowning the Emperor with victory over the Mountain Tribes."

She stopped short, remembering that this man came from Bindir, but Roneyn continued to smile.

"And the Governor is one of the judges?" he asked calmly.

"The Governor, and the Guildmasters, all of whom will be only too eager to display their loyalty."

Roneyn nodded. "When politics mix with art there can be problems, but don't despair. The competition may surprise you."

"Tomar is really that good?"

"He could be, if you help him..."

"What does that mean?" Dergalla began to pace around the room. "Am I only his inspiration? I am no artist, but I'm a human being too, with strengths, and needs, and fears!"

"Yes, all that, and more —" Roneyn turned her to face him. So close, she could feel the power in him as if she were standing next to a fire. His breathing quickened, and Dergalla felt her own heart begin to pound once more.

He could have me— she realized. *All he has to do is ask...*

"You do not yet know the strength that is in you, Dergalla, or what you can do! And remember, unless you consent to it, no other will can hold you. Forget this competition. You are the one who will have to choose!"

"And if I chose you?" she asked with surprising steadiness.

"Ah, that *would* be interesting —" Master Roneyn took a deep breath. "But even with that temptation I will say no more. It is the lady who must decide!"

A scratching at the door parted them as if they had been caught in a guilty embrace. The kerchiefed head of Dergalla's maid appeared at the door.

"Mistress! Mistress Dergalla — it has been more than an hour, and your father will be seeking you. My lady, please! We must go!"

Tomar was never entirely sure where he went after he left Master Roneyn's studio. He must have stopped, at least once, at a tavern, for his head was still spinning when he regained consciousness somewhere near the wharves. The cool air from the river drove the last of the wine fumes away. Presently his footsteps echoed on wood and he realized he was on one of the docks.

I could just keep going, he thought, *until I walked into the river! That's one way out of my troubles... Would Dergalla weep for me?*

Starshine glimmered on the ripples. Here where two rivers joined, the current was deep and strong. Was it lack of courage or just exhaustion that kept him from throwing himself in? Dergalla's luxuriant body and triumphant spirit affirmed the reality of Beauty, but what virtue could she find in him? If he had ever been able to paint — and now he doubted it — he certainly could not do so anymore.

The strength left him and he slid down against one of the posts and stayed there, staring blindly as the river mist devoured the stars.

Tomar had not expected to sleep, but he must have, because suddenly the morning sun was shining into his eyes and the fishermen were making rude comments as they went by. But Tomar scarcely saw them. His inner sight was filled by another vision, and whether it had been a dream or an enchantment of mist and starlight he neither knew nor cared. It did not matter even if it were the kind of vision that might win a prize; he only knew that he must try to capture it. He pushed himself to his feet. He ached in every bone, but that did not matter either. Nothing mattered in all the world but his dream. With an urgency that surpassed his flight of the night before he dashed back up into the town.

Master Roneyn was eating a leisurely breakfast when Tomar burst through the door, mumbled a reply to his greeting, and lurched towards his canvas.

The gesso which covered most of the previous painting was dry. Hastily he uncorked paintpots and laid out his brushes.

"I *said*, did you sleep well?" The Bindiri's deep voice held a genial amusement.

"No —" Tomar answered without looking away from the canvas. With his soft brush he was already laying in the outlines. "But I dreamed." There, a sure stroke suggested the stately sweep of trunk and branches, and beside it, the singing line of a woman's uplifted arm...

"Ah —" Roneyn let out his breath in a sigh of satisfaction. "A dream! Now you will understand the purest magic. And in this dream of yours, what, I wonder, did you see?"

It was as well that the question was rhetorical, for Tomar scarcely heard. Swiftly the outlines flowed from his paintbrush — a luxuriant garden in whose center rose a noble tree. Its fruit glowed with a softer gold than the sun, but had the same living splendor. Yet if the tree was splendid, the figure that stood beside it, gesturing to the viewer to take up that fruit and be healed, shone with a holy radiance.

It was the quality of light that gave life to the picture, and Tomar achieved the effect without even thinking how, laying down bold dapplings of unexpected color until the picture seemed to shimmer with the transparency of summer sunlight filtered through green leaves. The leafy canopy, the earth, even the rosy flesh of the woman for whom it was the setting, all were composed of confused flashes of rainbow color which organized themselves into glorious harmony when seen from a few steps away.

"That is vision certainly —" murmured Roneyn. "To illuminate without blinding — and the Goddess of the Garden is crowned with stars! It goes beyond the rules of art. The judges will not understand it, but they cannot help but respond, for this is the real magic that comes from the heart."

But Tomar was still painting. In the Lady's other hand he placed a garland. Her brilliant eyes were Dergalla's, the majesty of Her form was Dergalla's, and She was holding the wreath out to him with all Dergalla's love in Her smile.

On a brilliant midsummer morning, the assembled Guilds and Fraternities of Neri marched onto the Festival grounds to the music of flutes and brasses and the deep booming of copper-bottomed drums. Sitting with her mother and the other ladies in the shade of the long pavilion, Dergalla watched them, stirred in spite of herself by the pageantry. The same sun that blazed so blindingly from the snows of the mountains behind them struck sparks from gold thread worked into robes and the gilded finials of the Masters' ceremonial staffs.

The Honorable Fellowship of Market Farmers came first, followed by the fishermen, butchers and bakers, shoemakers, candle-dippers, and the Guild of Metalworkers, Dergalla's father, perspiring with heat and pride, foremost among them. Next came the luxury trades, including the Guild of Limners in whose ranks Dergalla recognized the Bindiri master and Tomar, hollow-eyed as if he had not slept since she saw him last. Finally, the priesthoods of the various shrines and temples marched in.

Each group marched up the main causeway and bowed to the big red pavilion which shaded General Wingulf and the other Bindiri nobility resident in the city, then took its place in the sector prepared for it. The wealthier associations had pavilions. Those reserved for the Metalworkers, the Painters and Limners, and the priesthood were made of silk. They had been donated by Master Kildon, said Dergalla's mother proudly. The pavilion which sheltered the ladies was of silk as well — yellow — which made everyone look jaundiced. She wondered what it had all cost.

"I don't care how many pavilions Papa has donated," she whispered to her mother, "I won't marry a man I cannot love!"

"Dergalla darling, be reasonable! Your father has supported you in comfort for eighteen years. Don't you think you should repay him?"

By spending my life with Master Bek? Even a daughter's duty doesn't stretch that far! But before she could answer, her mother leaned closer.

"Actually, dearest, it's all rather complicated — even I didn't know. Your father has invested in several caravans, and with the right political connections he can get favored treatment. If he doesn't —" She fluttered her hands helplessly, leaving a confused but vivid impression of disintegration.

Dergalla remembered the bright colors and political propriety of the picture Master Bek had brought in, and felt suddenly cold. Nervously she smoothed the figured white silk of her gown.

The Featherworkers marched past, their ranks forested with long-handled chamber fans plumed with red and gold, followed by the Perfumers in a dizzying cloud of sandalwood. And then, at last, everyone was in place.

Clarions blasted the conversations as the Governor rose to read a speech full of loyal protestations that might have strained even Bindiri patriotism if anyone had really been listening. The recent victory over the Mountain Tribes was celebrated with a pious wish that the opening of the Great Pass would stimulate trade and communication all over the Empire. Thanksgivings were offered for the birth of a new son to the Emperor, Ban Abeiren, ninth of that name. Wingulf congratulated the Guildmasters of the success of their festival.

Dergalla scarcely heard. She was watching the Limners' multicolored pavilion, where Tomar and Master Roneyn sat among their peers. On the other side of the pavilion, in the front row, was Master Bek, smoothing his thinning black hair complacently as he saw her look his way.

I'd rather sell my body to the men who pole the barges than marry him! Dergalla swore silently. *At least it would be honest whoredom!*

Her gaze flicked back to Tomar and the stranger. Her father had kept her so close these past days there had been no way for her to see them. She wondered whether she really did have a voice in her own destiny, and if so, what should she choose?

She believed in Tomar's talent, but he had little chance of convincing the judges. And if he did win, apparently her father would lose. But Roneyn had high status in the capital, and he was certainly Bek's master. As his wife she would be secure, and her father would be pleased.

The clarions belled like hounds and suddenly everyone was looking at them. Dergalla's stomach lurched as she realized the waiting was over.

She let her father lead her through the sunshine to the ruddy shade of the Governor's pavilion, controlling her features as Wingulf seated her and patted her hand with an avuncular smile.

"A rose! Kildon, you raise a real rose here at the end of the world!" said the Governor, the faint accent that still betrayed his barbarian origins giving a faintly explosive quality to his words. Dergalla met the speculative glances of the Bindiri ladies and wondered just how badly she had creased her gown.

"So, now we have a little romance here? All the young men are after this girl, yes?" General Wingulf laughed.

"The Fine Arts and the Practical Arts will be united by this marriage," Dergalla's father proclaimed, gesturing towards the blue-robed members of the Limners' Guild who had taken position in a semicircle before the Governor's pavilion with the masters of the other guilds behind them.

Not to mention the art of political expediency, thought Dergalla, favoring the Governor with a mechanical smile. Master Kildon did not appear to see the lifted eyebrows, or hear the Bindiri ladies titter behind their hands.

"So, bring on the pictures then. Can't sit here all day or we melt, eh! I expect the pictures do, too."

The Master of the Limners' Guild came forward, and presently two apprentices carried in a large canvas by one of the older masters who was not in competition, being married already, but would not pass up a chance to display his work to such a well-endowed audience. Others followed, equally ineligible, and Dergalla blotted moist palms against her gown.

"The Destruction of Arhini, by Master Bek..."

Dergalla suppressed a start as the Guildmaster's harsh voice spoke almost in her ear. *Don't look, don't show that it matters to you!* she told herself, trying to ignore the murmur of comment on the painting's polish and politics. She could not look at Tomar; she *would* not look at Master Bek's complacent smile. Dergalla's gaze, seeking onward, came to the shadows of the priests' pavilion and flinched from the malevolent satisfaction she saw in the face of Mirrakin.

When she looked up again, two more pictures had joined the line-up, and the Guildmaster was announcing the final competitor.

"Inspiration, by Tomar, a journeyman. An entry in the competition —" he added, in a tone which sharpened as the slaves turned the picture so that it could be seen. There were a few exclamations from the Bindiri, and then a murmur of amusement.

Dergalla bit back a cry of dismay at the confusion of color that smote her eyes. Amid the jumble of bold brushstrokes it was hard to say what exactly was being portrayed. This was not the picture whose beginnings Tomar had shown her. Had that Bindiri bewitched him, or was he simply maddened by despair? She saw his face, white as a blank canvas, with eyes that begged her understanding. But with the ruin of all their hopes before her what was there to understand? Clinging to the rags of her pride, she looked away.

"I think we know who gets the prize!" said the Governor genially. "Master Bek's workmanship is only equaled by his choice of subject!" There was a general mutter of agreement from the assembled masters, and the Governor turned to Dergalla's father. "Well, Master Kildon, what do you say?"

Kildon cleared his throat, but another voice cut across his reply —

"My lord Governor, before you make your decision, may a newcomer to your city who is nonetheless a loyal subject of our Emperor say a word?"

Dergalla's eyes opened. The stranger, Master Roneyn, had stepped out from among his fellows. He made a deprecating bow.

"No painting looks its best in the shadows — why not let everyone approve your judgment by bringing the entries out into the light?"

Recognizing the Bindiri accent, General Wingulf smiled indulgently and waved assent. One by one, the slaves carried the pictures outside. As Master Bek's painting was lifted, Dergalla recognized once more the glossy perfection of each detail. The soldiers were like the garrison on parade, the Emperor's profile perfection, the defeated tribesmen as barbarous as she had always imagined them.

And then the light of noonday struck full upon the painted surface and suddenly everything changed. Figures which had seemed about to march off the canvas were stiff, crudely-drawn; proportion and composition unbalanced; and the face of the Emperor clumsily copied from a coin. From the ranks of the limners came an astonished gasp.

No one had told the slaves to stop. As the murmur of speculation spread, they continued to bear their burdens into the sunlight. Carrying Tomar's painting, the last of them joined his fellows and turned to face the Governor.

Once more Dergalla gasped, for the picture which she had seen before as a mass of crude daubings leaped suddenly into focus, and she looked upon a vision. But not even when people began to whisper and point from the figure in the painting to her and back again could she believe that she had been the model. It was a goddess who stood under the Tree of Life with the garland of victory in her hand.

Is that really the way Tomar thinks of me? Suddenly ashamed, Dergalla looked full at him for the first time that day, and saw him as she had seen him in Master Roneyn's drawing, with a kind of shining about him that came from something more than the blur of moisture in her eyes.

In that moment, Dergalla realized that though she had been flattered by Tomar's adoration, excited by his caresses, even touched by his need for her, she had never truly loved him until now. The knowledge struck like a sword, severing her from the past. Whatever the outcome of the contest that fact would remain. She stood in an unknown country now.

"Sorcery! He's used sorcery to cheat me of my due!" Master Bek darted into the half-circle, jabbing his finger furiously towards Roneyn. "My Lord Governor, I appeal to your justice —"

"And so do I!" exclaimed Roneyn. "Why, I wonder, is Master Bek so quick to babble of sorcery? Is it perhaps because he has already tried it? Governor, you know your city. Would any of Neri's sorcerers put a spell on a painting for a percentage of the prize?"

The General's frown had grown thunderous. "High Priest, come here!" His parade-ground bark brought the high priest of Harmas hurrying forward. He came to a stop in front of the Governor's pavilion, straightening his black robes like a crow after a storm.

"My Lord, how can I serve you?"

"How do you think? Use your arts — test the picture," he gestured towards Master Bek's *Destruction,* "and then do the same to that one with the tree in it, over there!" The pointed finger jabbed towards Tomar's picture as well.

The priest looked nervously over his shoulder, then took a deep breath, drew a gold and crystal wand from the folds of his robes, and touched it to Master Bek's picture, muttering. Blue light flared from the tip of the wand and

played across the canvas. When it faded the painting looked even more tawdry than before.

"Mirrakin, you traitor, you promised me nobody could break that spell!" Master Bek's screech split the air.

The high priest looked over his shoulder at the priests' pavilion, but his wand was already touching Tomar's painting. Again the blue radiance shimmered, but the painting was unchanged. If anything, it seemed more luminous than before.

A word from the Governor sent two men towards the dark ranks of the priests of Harmas, but even as the high priest touched Bek's painting, Mirrakin had disappeared. Still cursing, Bek tried to run, but the soldiers, having failed in their first objective, eagerly dragged him back again.

"Yes, I hired Mirrakin to do a small spell!" Bek gibbered, "for the Emperor's glory — was that such a crime? He swore no sorcerer in Neri could undo it, but he didn't know about this stranger! My Lord Governor, give me justice too! Let us see who this Roneyn really is! Let this man who calls himself a Masterpainter be tested for black sorcery!"

Suddenly everything seemed to have gone very still. The high priest's lips were moving, but there was no sound. Master Roneyn stood watching him, and Dergalla trembled. How could the Bindiri remain so calm? The high priest appeared to struggle with some invisible foe, and looked at the other man in appeal.

"Do as he bids you, adept —" Master Roneyn smiled.

The high priest repressed a shudder, then paced quickly around him, tracing the circle with his wand. Blue fire blazed up where it touched the ground. The priest stepped backward and once more lifted the wand. Calling aloud in tones that sent a shiver across the skin despite the heat of the day, the high priest drew a Symbol in the air.

Blue it flamed at first, and then whirling inward, became crimson, flaring brighter and brighter. The magefire played over the Roneyn's body until it was veined in lines of glowing gold. For a moment they saw him robed in radiance with a staff in his hand and on his head a great headdress crowned by flaring wings. The high priest moaned softly and sank to his knees.

Then the magic faded; robes and headdress shimmered and were gone, leaving the man they had called Master Roneyn clad as he had been before. And yet he was not quite the same. The features of the Bindiri painter had realigned themselves into the face of majesty which Dergalla had glimpsed when she visited his chambers, but which, like her vision of Tomar, she had not understood until now.

"You are the Archpriest of Triple Harmas! You rule the sorcerers who serve the Emperor!" rasped the Governor.

"Master, forgive me!" the high priest babbled into the ground.

"Did I not say I would be watching? Perhaps you will believe me now!" The Archpriest turned to the Governor. "I think that the charges of sorcery have been dealt with. Will you make your judgment now?"

"When you are here?" The Governor

Artist: Jill Bauman

shook his head. "How would *you* decide?"

"The lady Dergalla is the one who will be most affected by the outcome. I would let the maiden choose..." The Bindiri sorcerer smiled.

And then everyone was looking at her.

Dergalla took a deep breath and stood up. With dreamlike deliberation she moved into the sunlight. She saw Bek, still watching her with mixed hatred and desire. She saw Tomar, thin and awkward, looking at her with his soul naked in his eyes. She saw the Archpriest, waiting with the patience of perfected power, and stopped in front of him, achingly aware of the force whose veiled presence she had sensed in him before.

"If I were as Tomar has painted me, I would choose you —" she said softly, "for I would need nothing, not even for you to need me. But you have shown me what Tomar is, and even though I am not the Lady of his vision, he shows me what I would wish to be." She held out her hand in appeal.

The Archpriest took it and for a moment held her gaze with his own. "He has shown you what you *will* be, and you have seen what *he* will be, if you both keep faith until the end."

Then, still holding Dergalla's hand, he led her to Tomar. "Here is the new Master!" He seized Tomar's arm and swung it upward triumphantly. "He has won his lady fairly. Who can deny him his victory?"

"He may have won the girl, but he'll win no prize!" Bek's spite edged a real agony. "Her precious father has bankrupted himself on this contest. Will you take her with no dowry?" He leered at Tomar. "And you, mistress, will you marry this man if you have to live on millet and goat cheese?" For a fleeting moment Dergalla felt pity, knowing that in its way Bek's passion had been sincere. But it had not been love.

She looked at Tomar, whose thin wrists stuck out from the sleeves of his blue journeyman's gown and whose pale hair was ruffled like a cock's comb, but who gazed at her with all the light of sunrise in his eyes.

"Yes!" he answered, and his voice rang like a bell.

"I will..." Dergalla echoed, and felt her flesh kindle at the touch of Tomar's as the Masterpainter joined their hands. ❄

Diana L. Paxson is a prolific fantasy author with settings ranging from the alternate California of the Westria series to the mythic northern Europe of her two current series based on Germanic legend and on the Fionn mac Cumhail legend (the latter a collaboration with Adrienne Martine-Barnes).

Jill Bauman has done book covers and interior illustrations for most of the major publishers in the fantasy, horror, and mystery fields. She has been nominated for a World Fantasy Award five times, and is Artist Guest of Honor at this year's World Fantasy Convention in New Orleans.

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THE WITCH'S FAMILIAR

by Linda Dunn

The villagers formed a tight ring of people around the witch's house.

"Be still," Ethelreda's father whispered as she stepped none too gently upon a nearby twig. "The king's witch hunter has taken steps to protect us but we dare not alert the witch inside. We must throw our torches at exactly the right moment. The hunter will tell us when."

"Now!" came the cry from beyond the ring. A few dozen ragged villagers threw their torches from as far back as they could stand and still make the toss good. They feared the witch inside but they feared the king's witch hunter and soldiers even more.

A yowl of pain pierced the evening air as an ugly black cat leaped to freedom. It faced the crowd for only an instant before running past the startled villagers and disappearing into the nearby woods.

"It's her familiar," shouted the witch hunter. "After him, children. Catch that demon in cat form."

The children ran, Ethelreda too.

Any other day she would have insisted she was almost a woman and demanded to stay with the adults. But what was happening here made her want to be a child again for as long as possible.

She followed the children into the woods and then stopped as screams filled the air. Stuffing her fingers into her ears couldn't block those cries of anguish. Why didn't they give the old woman a quick death instead of trapping her inside to burn?

She took her fingers out of her ears and led the children deeper into the woods. But no matter how far they traveled, they couldn't escape the horror. The witch's screams seemed to follow them forever as they searched through the trees and tall grass for the ugly old cat.

Ethelreda hoped they didn't find it.

The embers from the fire were dying by the time she and the children returned. No one had found the huge black cat. There was no sign of him at all.

How quickly they forget, Ethelreda thought as the villagers drifted back to their own homes. The king's witch hunter and soldiers rode off. No doubt there were other villages to save and other witches to burn.

She hated them. Life was simple until they arrived. Now everything was changed and she didn't think she'd ever feel like a child again.

Ethelreda bedded down in the straw next to her younger sisters and tried to sleep. She couldn't. The witch's screams seemed to echo through her mind even now.

Questions troubled her, too.

Why did everyone believe this woman was a witch? She had no riches, no special powers to heal, and certainly no powers to harm. No one had anything to say about the old woman either good or bad until the witch hunter arrived and declared her a witch.

Then suddenly people remembered bad things which had occurred after passing the old hag. People became sick and animals died after she stared nastily at them.

The people who became sick recovered and the animals which died had been chased by a pack of wild dogs. But no one seemed to remember these things. Or perhaps they didn't care. Maybe they were just grateful that the witch hunter had chosen someone other than themselves to be the village witch.

To defend a witch was to be accused yourself. No one dared speak. Not even Ethelreda.

She felt a sick feeling in her stomach as she thought of this. Her younger sisters snored peacefully nearby, untroubled by any thoughts like those which kept her awake. But they were still children and she would never feel so innocent again.

Ethelreda tossed and turned uncomfortably until she saw light shining through the hole in their roof.

The moon was big and full, larger than she'd ever seen it before. It was beautiful.

Ethelreda climbed down from the loft and drifted out the door. She only intended to walk in the moonlight for a moment but soon found herself standing by the spot where the witch's home had been. For a brief instant, she thought she saw a small fire; but then the flames flickered and moved and she realized it was just a cat. A fiery orange cat.

"You are the one," a voice said from within her own mind.

"Who's there?" she asked. But no one answered. At least, no human voice.

The orange cat waltzed over and sat down beside her. It stared up with yellow eyes gleaming in the darkness and Ethelreda gasped as she realized what was happening.

This was the witch's cat. Somehow it had changed to the color of fire. And she no longer had a will of her own.

"Foolish girl. I need another. You will do. It will be good to have young hands again to do my bidding."

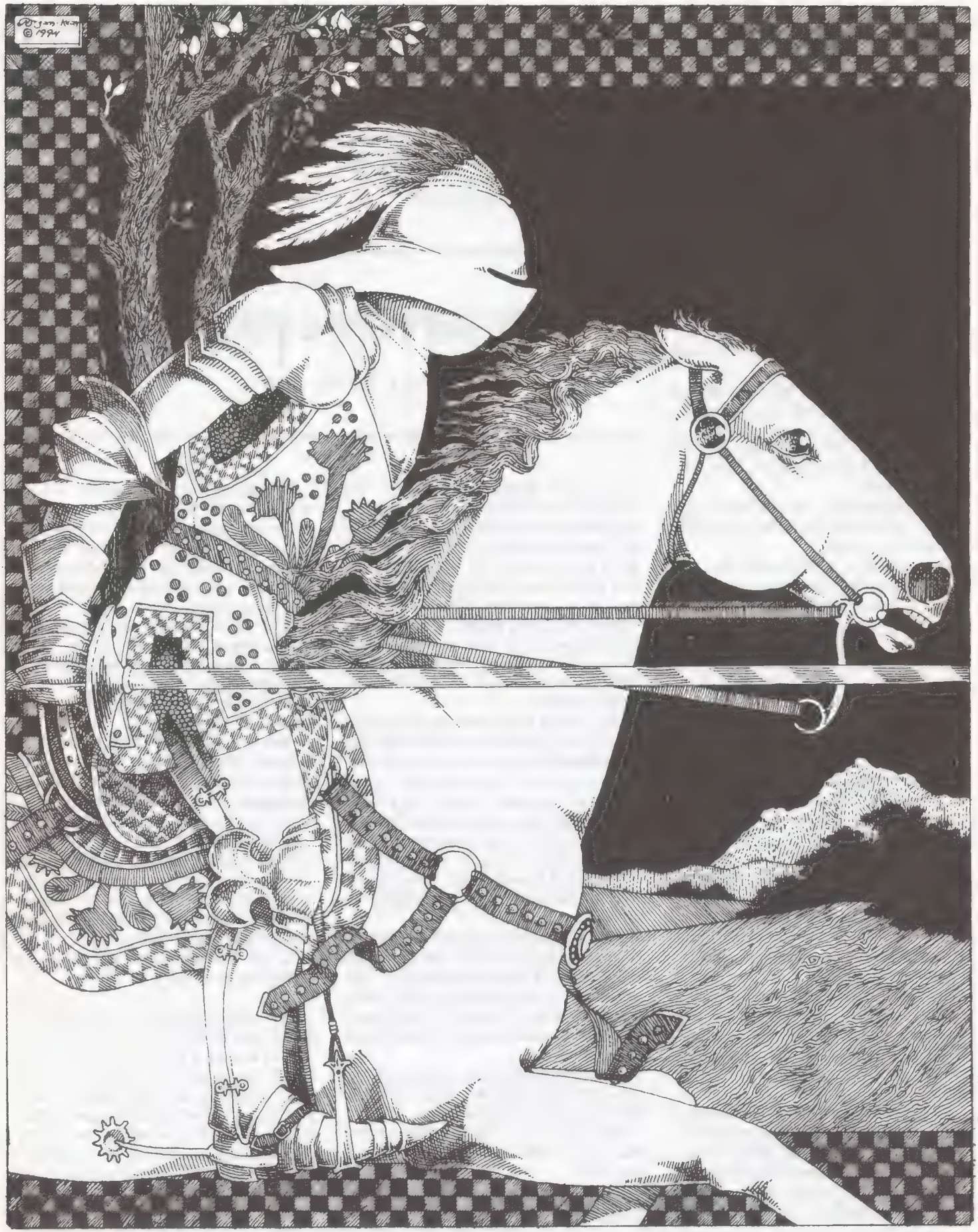
"But who are you?" she asked as she followed the cat down the path. She didn't want to leave home but it seemed she had no choice. The cat knew where it was going and Ethelreda could do naught but follow.

"Silly child," the cat chided as it looked back toward the remains of the witch's hut. *"None of you ever understand. It is I who am the witch. Your idiot people killed my familiar.*

"Come. The night grows cold and we've a long way to travel."

❄

LINDA DUNN has had stories in INFINITE LOOP and WITCH FANTASTIC as well as a previous sale to *FANTASY Magazine.* Her family has five cats, including one part Maine Coon, part Manx cat which appeared rather mysteriously the morning after Linda wrote a story describing her. Her husband, Greg, still refers to this cat as "the one Linda conjured up by writing a story."



Artist: Margaret Organ-Kean

Things are not always as they seem

by George Morrow

The sun slowly rose over the surrounding hills, spreading its light across the forest and into a clearing by a rock wall. In the clearing was a young woman tied to a tree; she was dressed in a long flowing gown. The woman pulled at the rawhide that bound her wrists. It had dried and was now stronger than she could break.

"Dawn's coming," she muttered.

The light began to fill the cave in front of her and she could now see movement inside the cave. More sun burned away the gloom of the cave and golden scales of the occupant could be seen.

"Give," she whispered. As she pulled at the rawhide again, a bit of worry in her voice. The cave's occupant stepped out into the light. The woman gasped in horror as the gold dragon appeared. It was bigger than she first thought. Its head had to be ten feet in length.

Before she could scream, the thunder of hoofbeats reached her ears. Moments later, a huge white charger galloped into the clearing. It bore on its back a knight in shining armor, and he was brandishing a lance over his head. He bellowed, "Back from the maiden, ye foul beast, or I shall be forced to run ye through!"

The dragon looked confused, then slowly backed into the cave. The woman could now see the inside of the cave. There was some gold, jewels, many bones, and a nest that contained two golden colored eggs. The dragon curled around the eggs protectively, her armored nostrils blowing in anger.

The charger snorted as the knight dismounted. His scarlet cloak flowed in the slight breeze. He removed his helmet and shook his head allowing his blond hair to find freedom. Finally his hair settled and framed a kind face. Through his blue eyes he regarded the woman before him.

"I have chased the foul beast for you," the knight bowed. "You are a fine lass." He then began to stare at her.

She began to feel uncomfortable in her flowing gown. Suddenly his hand reached out and began to caress her thigh.

"Yes, you are a nice one," the knight sneered.

"Please untie me, oh gallant knight," the woman pleaded.

"What is your name...girl?" her savior asked.

"You can call me Seactra," she spoke. There was anger in her voice, "Now untie me!"

There was a crunch on the ground behind the man in armor; the dragon was coming out of the cave. The knight spun and yelled in an evil unearthly voice that sounded like an erupting volcano, "Back in the cave, beast, or your eggs will perish!"

The dragon looked angry and confused, and again she quickly retreated to her cave.

Seactra's savior turned his attention back to her. He came closer to her and sniffed. "You smell different from the other sacrifices," he sneered.

"What are you?" Seactra gasped.

"I am obviously not what you think," the knight scoffed with contempt. His face began to change; it darkened and grew wider. A second vertical mouth formed in his throat and a third eye appeared on his forehead. Seactra began to pull at the bonds that held her,

desperate to be free from the thing before her. He was still changing; his eyes burned like coal fire, and fangs and horns appeared.

"I will tell you who I am," he chided the woman. "Two years ago, my steed (which is a weaker demon) and I left the Nether Worlds. I found this cave that had recently been occupied by a gold dragon. She had just laid her eggs. I realized that we were equals in nearly all ways, and a battle would yield no winner. Her eggs were vulnerable, though. The 'she-dragon' knew that she could not protect them all the time. I told her to do as I said or the eggs would be destroyed.

"I then went to a nearby village and dressed as a merchant, approached its leaders and told them of the 'man-eating dragon'. The leaders were superstitious individuals, so it was easy to convince them that a maiden must be tied outside the cave at each equinox for a sacrifice. The dragon would then leave their village unharmed. After the maiden was left, I would arrive to 'save' her. I would then feast on the sacrificial maiden's blood." The demon paused and with a sign continued, "Soon I must move on because the eggs will hatch. After all, dragonlings are nearly indestructible."

"Why this façade?" Seactra quietly asked.

"I like to play with my food before I drink its blood." The thing reached out its now-clawed hand. Gently it ran a claw down her cheek, flaying it open. It then placed the finger in its mouth and licked the blood off the claw.

Seactra looked at the horse. It too had changed. Its shiny white coat was now soot black, its hooves now clawed feet, and its eyes a depthless red.

"Please don't kill me," Seactra began to whimper.

"What!" The demon laughed. "You are pathetic, but I like sport, so I will give you a chance. I shall cut your bonds, then let you run back toward the village. After five minutes I shall follow on foot. If you make the village, you live; if I catch you, we'll have dinner."

He then walked behind the tree and slashed through the rawhide with his claws. Seactra didn't wait. She pulled her gown up above her ankles and ran as fast as she could through the underbrush for the village that lay four miles away.

Less than a minute later she heard footsteps behind her, "Lying demon," she cursed to herself.

A clawed hand reached out and grabbed her shoulder and whirled her around, then the other hand slashed out at her chest. The demon took a step back. He was confident that if she ran, he could catch her. He wanted to see her unclothed beauty before he killed her. She stood defiantly before him, holding the scraps of fabric across her body.

"Show me yourself and if I am pleased you shall be free," he lied.

"With pleasure," Seactra hissed, as she dropped the fabric to reveal that her chest was covered with armor. She quickly tore off the rest of the gown to reveal that her entire body was armored. She had a short sword that was strapped to her back. The demon's eyes then fixed on an amulet that hung around her neck. It was circular and had a cross in it.

"I like to play with my food before I drink its blood."

"You are of the holy order," he hissed, "but I thought all of your kind had been destroyed!"

"You're smart for a demon," Seactra snapped back. Her hands began to burn with white fire. "The holy order of Protectorate Knights was nearly destroyed an eon ago during the last war to imprison the dark horde that you represent. They now seek out potential warriors and train them in secrecy, so as not to alert the forces of darkness. The training begins when we are just babes. Then we are sent out alone to find evil and stop it. If the source of evil is too powerful to be handled alone, we return to the hidden university and report the evil's strength and movements. I have long since left the university. I felt the presence of your evil, and it drew me to the village that you hold in fear. They told me of the sacrifices and of the dragon. I chose to be the next sacrifice. When I saw that the dragon was golden in color, I knew that something was wrong, for they are a quiet and peaceful race. Then you appeared."

The demon snarled and leapt for her throat. Seactra's left arm shot forward, launching flames at the demon. The flames struck the demon in his chest, knocking him back to the ground.

Seactra slowly walked forward. "Do you yield?"

The creature lunged again at her. The flames struck out again at the wretched thing, burning it once more.

Seactra stood over the smoldering creature, her blue-gray eyes hard. "Things are not always what they seem. When you reach the Nether Worlds again, tell your master that the power of good shall overcome!"

Flames jumped from both hands, obliterating the demon. Seactra turned to deal with his steed; there was a whoosh and a blast of heat. She grinned. The gold dragon had smitten the demon horse with its flames, sending the weaker creature to follow its master to the Nether Worlds.

Seactra smiled and laughed. "Well done, friend. When your dragonlings hatch, fly and find a new home, away from danger. I shall return to the village and inform them of what happened. Then I shall move on again to another place that is overshadowed with evil." The warrior then turned and walked toward the village.

The dragon smiled, knowing that the dark times would soon be gone if there were more warriors like Seactra in the world.

As the holy warrior walked away from the dragon, she knew that her life's destiny would be good, if things went as well in the future. But then again, Seactra knew that things are not always as they seem.

❄

George Morrow is working on a degree in Wildlife Management and gathering skills that he hopes to put to use with the National Park Service, or any other career that will let him indulge his passion for camping and the outdoors. This is his first published story.

Margaret Organ-Kean studied art and art history at Boston University, Central Washington University, and University of Washington. She has been a professional illustrator since age fifteen. She works as a PC coordinator and systems operator in Seattle. She is also currently working for Wizards of the Coast on a new game, and she has drawn cars for the Magic Expansions and Jyhad. She likes flan, shopping, and feeding the ducks at Greenlake.

The Spell Game

by Jennifer Ashley

"Can you fix it?"

Holeena worriedly examined the deep gash on Mavis's cheekbone. She brushed the wound slowly with her forefinger, silently reciting the healing spells that would bring the flesh together again. As always when she used her magic, Holeena's senses stretched and heightened. She could hear every tiny snap of the fire devouring the log on the hearth, could sense the deep silence of the night around their tiny cottage, and could pick out the scent of each herb floating in the water basin from the stronger smell of Mavis's blood. Beneath her fingers, the wound dried and closed.

Mavis sat rigidly under her touch, her boots dangling motionlessly just above the floor. When Holeena turned away, Mavis brought up her own fingers to touch the ridge just under her eye. She grinned. "Good as new."

"You'll have a scar," Holeena said discouragingly. She wiped her hands on a towel and picked up the empty basin. "Are you going to tell me how you got hurt?"

Mavis shrugged. "It seems a man decided the little paramour I found tonight was his instead. We argued. I lost."

Holeena sighed heavily. "Oh, Mavis. I wish you wouldn't."

"What do you want me to do, sister mine? Find a nice man and settle down? Fancy the surprise of any man who took me as a wife.

"Besides, Holee, dear," Mavis went on, sliding down from the table and slapping the dust from the back of her breeches, "I make far more money selling my blade than any husband would give me. I would think you would want me unmarried so I can keep you in herbs and chalk."

"I wasn't suggesting you marry, Mavis," said Holeena, turning away to finish washing out the basin.

"What, then?"

"Never mind. It's an old argument that I have no wish to start again."

"I see. You don't like that I keep back some of my money for drink and other satisfactions instead of giving it all to you."

"I only wish you could find some other ways of satisfying yourself, that's all."

Mavis was silent for a moment.

"I deal in death, Holeena," she said gently. "I try to forget that by dealing with life as much as I can. It's the only way I know how to survive."

"I thought you would learn differently after living with me this long," Holeena said, trying to be reproving.

Mavis, as usual, ignored her. Instead she crossed the room to her and hugged her from behind. "You are the only reason I have to live now, sweet sister." She straightened up. "I'm going out again."

"After what happened earlier tonight? Suppose I refuse to patch you up if you get into another fight?"

"You won't," said Mavis confidently. She slid a long knife into the top of her boot, winked at her sister, and was gone.

Holeena wiped the basin dry and patted her hands with the linen towel. She would never understand Mavis. She hadn't understood her when they were children living with their stonecutter father. And she hadn't understood when, the night their father was set upon by thieves and murdered, Mavis vanished. After this double loss, their mother took sick and slowly died, leaving Holeena alone.

Until, that is, Mavis reappeared ten years later. She still possessed her good-natured smile and cheerful banter, but she had a new bitterness about her that Holeena did not understand. Mavis vaguely explained that she ran away to learn swordsmanship but would say no more than that. Since then, Mavis had hired herself out as a sword wielder or bodyguard and dutifully brought most of the coins she earned to her younger sister. When Mavis was between jobs, as she was now, she relieved her boredom with drinking, fighting, and pursuing various pleasures with men or women.

At least with Mavis gone, probably for the rest of the night, Holeena thought, she would have the opportunity to school herself in her spellweaving. She had the ability to use few spells in spite of poring over her books until they were greasy with

use. A good sorcerer could draw spells and cast them with her mind, but Holeena usually had to draw her spell lines physically and concentrate intently to make the spell work. She could mind-draw some spells, like the healing spell she used on Mavis. New spells, however, had to be drawn with chalk and herbs.

She opened her smallest book to a marked page. Then she took chalk and herbs from the box where she hoarded them, and, after sweeping the flagstones in front of the fire, she knelt down on the floor, forcing the book to lie flat, open to the page she needed. Following the words carefully, she began to trace the designs on the grey stones with her chalk, drawing them very slowly and whispering words of power as she went along. The chalk stub ground grittily on the floor as she moved backward on her hands and knees, drawing the designs in one continuous stroke, never lifting the chalk once she had begun.

It took a long time to complete the pattern. Her knees and hands ached from the hard stones, her fingers were cramped around the chalk, and her mouth was dry from her whispered chants. She could not stop until the chalk came around to finish the design where it had started, or the spell would not work. When she connected her line to its starting point, she felt a slight surge in her fingertips and in her temples. The spell had begun. Now she must use the dried herbs to trace the chalk lines carefully. Holeena rubbed her knees and tried to rearrange her skirts to pad them before she began.

This step of the spell was more difficult than the last. She must keep the line of herbs on the chalk line, and there must be no break. By the time she was a third of the way through, her eyes were heavy with weariness. But she couldn't stop, or it would all be for nothing, and she would have to start over again.

The door to the cottage banged open, letting in Mavis and a draught of air that caught the herbs and swirled them across the hearth to fall in a gentle shower into the fire. Holeena sat back on her heels in dismay, staring at the wreckage of her work.

"Mavis!"

Mavis was drunk. The older girl lurched into the room and slammed the door behind her.

"Sorry," she said sulkily. She shuffled over to the bed on the other side of the room and fell face down on it and didn't move.

Holeena cursed under her breath. She snapped her little book shut and rose stiffly. Her limbs and head ached, and she was incredibly thirsty. She wasn't sure if she should wake Mavis and scold her or simply ignore her. Neither seemed satisfactory.

She crossed the room to the water bucket by the door. It was empty. She remembered using the last of the water to clean Mavis's wound earlier that night. Knowing that she must go to the pump if she wanted a drink of water did not improve her temper. No matter, she thought. The spell is ruined. I might as well do something useful tonight.

She picked up the bucket and left the cottage. The cool night air on her face made her feel a little better. Mavis would get another job soon, she thought, and then she would have the cottage to herself, and she could study all day and night without interruption if she liked. She would have to sweep the floor again and try to save all the herbs she could until she could afford to buy more. She wished she knew how to grow her own, but her plants always withered and died no matter what she did to them.

When she reached the pump, she noticed for the first time that it was very late and that the streets were very quiet. The squeak and clack of the pump seemed unusually loud to her as she vigorously pushed the handle. When the water started to run, she put her hand under it and scooped some of it into her mouth, letting it run gloriously down her parched throat. Then she set the bucket under the stream of water and pumped until it was nearly full.

It took her a long time to drag the heavy bucket back to the house, and by that time, her anger at Mavis had cooled. Let the girl sleep, she thought. She'll be sick enough in the morning.

She opened the door. Holeena stood still in the doorway, staring at the bed where her sister had lain just a few moments before. Mavis was gone. And Holeena knew that Mavis had not awakened and gone away of her own accord. Every nerve within her tingled with the sense that someone else had been in that cottage. They had come in while she had been at the well. She could sense deep within her the struggle that had taken place there, the brief drawing of blood, and then, the unmistakable scent of magic. Her eyes were drawn to the foot of the bed, and she saw drops of blood there. Mavis's blood? She couldn't know.

She put down the heavy bucket and turned around slowly, every muscle taut. Just as she could sense the struggle, she could sense the magic that had come from another sorcerer, and she could follow that faint indication of magic out into the night. As if she were in a trance, she stumbled along after it, knowing that she would find her sister, dead or alive, at the end of it and that she would find a sorcerer there, probably stronger than herself. That didn't matter. She must go.

Her senses led her out of the village to a cottage set back from the road that led to the woods. The cottage had been empty for some time now, since the woodcutters who had lived there had gone to find better earnings in some city, but now it blazed with light. Without hesitation, Holeena went to the door and turned the handle.

The door opened easily, and she looked into a room barren of anything but a crudely-built table drawn near a small fireplace. The light did not come from the fire or from any candles she could see, it just *was*. Mavis leaned on the wall near the door. Her hands were tied tightly in front of her, and two men stood on either side of her, one holding a knife to her throat. Behind the table stood a small man with one lock of grey, greasy hair slicked back over his bare scalp. He was dressed in a brown wool robe that just reached the top of his black boots.

"You will not hurt her," Holeena heard herself say.

Mavis's eyes were red but focused. "Get out of here, Holee," she said hoarsely, but Holeena ignored her. Her attention was focused on the man behind the table, the source of the magic.

"No," the man said easily. "I brought her here so you would come to me. When I entered the village, I sensed another sorcerer, and I wanted to meet you."

"I won't give you any trouble," Holeena answered stiffly. "Let my sister and me go home."

"I will. Later. I want to learn all about you. Shall we have a game? That's always a good way for sorcerers to get to know one another."

"No," said Holeena. She was sur-

prised that her voice sounded so reasonable. "I only want my sister to go home, unharmed."

"Once you and I have had our game, you both may leave."

Holeena came forward warily. "And if I refuse to play?"

"Then my men will kill her," the sorcerer said smoothly, smiling at her.

She was silent a moment, outwardly calm, but her heart quickened. "What happens if I lose this game?"

"Win or lose, you will go. But I must insist you stay and play." He nodded at one of the men with Mavis, who stepped behind Holeena and closed and bolted the door.

Holeena moved toward the sorcerer until she stood across the table from him. "What is the nature of the game?"

"It's very simple. There's nothing to worry about," he responded, never losing his smile. "Let us begin."

He motioned toward the table. Holeena looked down and saw thin silver lines appear and trace themselves in a simple design across the tabletop; they were spell lines he was creating with his mind. The spell he drew was a simple one that she knew, a fertility spell. She was puzzled. She feared that he would attack her somehow with his magic and had braced herself for it, but this non-threatening spell confused her.

He finished the lines and stepped back, looking pleased. The silver lines glowed for a moment on the tabletop, then vanished. "Your turn," he said.

His "game", Holeena decided, was more a demonstration of technique than a battle of magic. It seemed harmless, but why abduct Mavis to draw her here if it was harmless?

She looked down at the table and concentrated, drawing with her mind the most basic spell she knew. It quickly coalesced in front of them, and she was finished.

"Very pretty," he said. "The calling of fire. The first spell we learn."

The lines disappeared and new ones appeared as he drew his next spell. A growing spell, she recognized, for garden crops. It was one she had tried but never mastered. When he was finished, she stepped forward again and began. She thought she understood what he was doing. Sorcerers were always wary of one another, and when he had felt her magic, he decided to find out how powerful a sorcerer she was and what kind of threat she might be to him. The game was a way of finding out what

Artist: Gail Butler

she knew. He would probably "win" the game, she reflected, because the store of spells she could mind-draw was small.

It was her turn. She stepped forward and drew the silver lines that wove the healing spell she had used on Mavis earlier that night. As she did so, she felt a sudden weakness, similar to what she often felt when she forgot to eat while buried in her studies. She ignored it as she completed the spell drawing, but when she finished, the weakness increased. She looked up in confusion at the sorcerer, but he was bending over the table, intent on his next design.

When he finished, he motioned for her to begin again. Holeena had only two spells left. She called the words to her mind and let the lines appear on the table. As she did so, her weakness grew greater, and suddenly she knew what the sorcerer was doing.

He had called her there to see what she knew and then to take it from her. He was using the spell lines to take the magic she had and transfer it to himself. A parasite. She had heard of those who could do this and had heard of a sorcerer who died at the hands of one of these parasites. They were sorcerers who didn't want to or couldn't learn their magic by study and practice; they had to have it all right away. She knew that the stolen magic would burn a sorcerer away very quickly, but apparently these sorcerers didn't care about that as long as they could wield the power in the short time they had it. They didn't have the patience or the ability to master the spells slowly and completely, the only safe way to practice magic. The safe way could take years — or decades. Holeena had been studying for twelve years, and her magic ability was still limited.

She felt a sudden surge of anger. She thought of the long hours and days of study and the tedious memorization she had done to get even this far. And he wanted to take it all from her and possibly her life along with it.

She fell forward and clutched the table to keep her upright. Her magic-heightened senses heard Mavis's soft breathing behind her and felt the boredom of the two men guarding her. None of them could see the magic-drawn lines on the table — only another sorcerer could. She sensed that Mavis knew there was something wrong, but the other two were paying little attention.

Artist: Gail Butler

She could not let this sorcerer take her magic. Even if she lived through it, her life would be an empty shell of what it was before. Her life was her magic. She would be nothing.

She closed her eyes and brought her last spell to mind. It was the opposite of the healing spell, the spell of destruction. Her first teacher had made her learn it long ago, but she had never used it. Now she hurled it out of her.

The lines exploded onto the table, glowing with silver light. The sorcerer was not guarded; he had opened himself to imbibe all of Holeena's magic, and he drew the spell into him before he could stop himself. His eyes widened in surprise and fear, and he stumbled backward and fell heavily to the floor. Numbly, Holeena watched the sorcerer convulse and kick as the magic consumed him from within. He opened his mouth to scream, but all that came out was a soft moan, and then a silver mist, and then blood. He stopped convulsing and lay very still. The silver lines on the tabletop vanished, leaving it untouched and innocent.

She heard Mavis say, "Gods, Holeena, you killed him."

Slowly Holeena turned to face her. Mavis stood alone, her hands still bound, her captors gone. The sisters stared at one another for a moment, Holeena numb, Mavis horrified. Then Mavis bent over and struggled to pull her knife from her boot where she had hidden it earlier that night. She held it out toward Holeena. "Cut me free, Holee."

Holeena stumbled unevenly across the small room to her. She took the knife obediently and sliced at the cords that bound Mavis's hands. Once she was free, Mavis grabbed the knife from her and dragged her toward the door of the cottage. The magic light faded, and the cottage grew dark but for the small fire that flickered behind the table, casting its feeble light over the body of the dead man. Holeena looked back toward him, but Mavis pulled her out of the cottage.

"We have to get away from here."

"What?" Holeena looked at her, puzzled, as if she were just awakening from a long sleep.

"Holee, you killed him. We have to run away."

"Why?"

"Those men might tell someone you killed him. If anyone finds out, they'll kill you, and probably me too." When Holeena looked as if she still didn't understand, Mavis gripped her shoulders firmly. "We have to leave, Holee, before someone finds him."

Holeena started to feel some of Mavis's fear, but she was still loath to agree. Why should anyone care if she killed the sorcerer? He was a stranger, and he had tried to kill her, in a sense. Why couldn't they just go back home and pretend it hadn't happened? But, she realized, the sensible part of her mind awakening, the two men who held Mavis only saw her strike out with her magic and then saw the sorcerer die. They had no idea what he was trying to do to her, and if they did, they would probably conceal that. Holeena and Mavis lived in a small village among people who feared lawlessness. The villagers had much to lose, and they protected themselves relentlessly. If anyone knew that she had killed a man, and with her magic, they would fear her, and she didn't know what they might do because of their fear.

"But my things, my books," she began feebly.

"You stay here and keep out of sight," said Mavis. "I'll get them."

Miserably, Holeena hid herself in the brush on the other side of the road and watched as Mavis loped off in the direction of the village. Then she hid her head in her hands and tried not to remember the explosion of magic and the feeling of how easily the sorcerer had drunk it from her.

Mavis returned in an astonishingly short time, carrying two bulky bundles. She handed one to her sister, and Holeena tucked it under her arm wordlessly. Then she followed Mavis out onto the road, and they hurried away.

They walked on through the night. Trust Mavis to know what to do, Holeena thought. If she was bad at domestic life, Mavis was good at survival. Then she had another thought.

"Is this why you ran away before?" she asked Mavis's back. "Because you killed someone?"

Mavis stopped and spun around. In the darkness, Holeena could barely see the glitter of her sister's eyes or the stricken look on her white face. Holeena looked back at her in surprise. She hadn't been entirely serious, but she realized that was just what Mavis had done.

"I had to go," Mavis said hoarsely, "before anyone found out."

"Mavis," Holeena breathed, forgetting her own horror for the moment. "You were just a kid. You should have come and told us. If father hadn't been killed —" she broke off abruptly. The end of the phrase, "that same night you ran away," died in her throat. "Oh, Mavis."

"I never meant to," Mavis went on, her voice low and trembling. Holeena saw her cheeks grow wet and glisten in the starlight. "I just struck out. My knife went right into him."

Holeena stared at her, her thoughts tumbling over themselves in confusion. The reason for their flight suddenly diminished in importance.

"Why?"

"He was hurting me. He wouldn't stop hurting me. He didn't stop until he was dead."

Into Holeena's mind flashed an image of Mavis, young and terrified, standing over the body of her father, realizing what she had just done. Holeena had known that feeling tonight. But the sorcerer was a stranger to her, and she had feared for her life and Mavis's. Mavis had loved her father and had thought she could trust him. And then she had run away without a word of what she had done and, ten years later, returned and still kept her silence.

Holeena looked up at her sister who was crying openly in the middle of the road. The flash of shock and horror at Mavis's confession evaporated. Holeena had been a small child when her father had died. She had never really known him. Mavis was here now, taking care of her as she had done since her return.

Holeena moved forward and put her arms around the taller girl, and Mavis buried her face in her sister's shoulder. They stood still in the middle of the road, the younger sister comforting the older, each clinging tightly to the other while past and present faded into the darkness of the night.

*

Jennifer Ashley has a Master's degree in English literature and is continuing to work on her thesis project: a computer tutorial for Old English grammar. She lives with her husband and cat in Arizona and works at various writing and publishing-related jobs. This is her first sale.

Gail Butler is well-known in the Northwest as an artist and a fan. In her spare time she is a volunteer Jewish mother to Northwest art fandom.

Artist: Margaret Organ-Kean

What Dragons Prefer

BY DAYLE A. DERMATIS

I looked down from my horse at the mayor of this town I'd been sent to save, and wondered why I immediately found him so distasteful. Perhaps it was the fact that he had given to titling himself "Lord." Perhaps I was picking up clues from the townsfolk, particularly the women, who avoided him even as they crowded around me.

Or perhaps it was the way his eyes slid over me as he tried to see exactly what lay beneath my leather jerkin.

"Dragonslayer," he greeted, his smile slick beneath his well-oiled mustache. "Thank you for coming to aid us in our time of terror."

"I prefer 'Dragonseeker,'" I said politely. "It is not enough to have the skills to slay a dragon—one must learn about him as well. To know one's enemy is to destroy him."

And most people knew so little about dragons. I knew, for example, that dragons only fed once every twenty years, and then usually only one human. Is that such a bad thing, really, when wolves kill so many deer in the forest to survive, or humans kill sheep because roast mutton is so tasty? But people panicked if they saw a dragon glide far overhead on the highest currents, or if they caught a faint whiff of its acrid scent when the wind turned just right.

He insisted I spend the night in comfort at his home. I found something else to dislike: his manor was too opulent compared to the rest of the farming village, and had been built, no doubt, at the townsfolks' expense. It even had a rooftop garden!

"Do you lure the dragons with your virginity?" he asked during dinner.

"No," I said. I suspected he was less interested in how I lure dragons than in my possible virginal state. My supposition was confirmed when he muttered, "Pity," and turned his attentions to his meal.

I bolted the door to my room that night, and a good thing, for the latch rattled and I heard a thwarted curse.

I arose the next morning before dawn and before the mayor, whom I doubted had seen a sunrise in many a year. I, on the other hand, knew that dragons are nocturnal, and would find this one sleeping when I reached its lair.

While I hastily ate a cold sausage roll and drank a cup of tea standing up in the kitchen, I asked his cook if the dragon had carried off many of the town's residents.

"Hardly likely," she snorted, slapping her fists into the bread dough. "His lordship makes sure each girl is 'protected', as he says, barely a day past their first blooding."

The tea turned bitter on my tongue. So he thought ridding the town's young girls of their virginity would keep the dragon at bay? My instincts about him had been all too correct.

I rode off to find the dragon.

"All that's left is discussion of my payment," I told him when I returned the next evening. When I suggested we hold the discussion in his rooftop garden, his smile grew far too broad.

I had barely tucked the purse in my belt and dodged his first advance when the dragon arrived for her twenty-year meal.

Another thing few people know about dragons is that while the males prefer female virgins, the females like their men experienced.

Know your enemies, indeed.

❄

Dayle A. Dermatis has worked as a reporter, a freelance writer, and a bookseller for a major bookstore chain. She lives in southern California with her husband and cat — an oft-repeated theme among our authors. She has been writing since she was a child, but this is her first sale.

Margaret Organ-Kean illustrated two stories for us this time — both involving dragons. We promise we'll give her something else next time.

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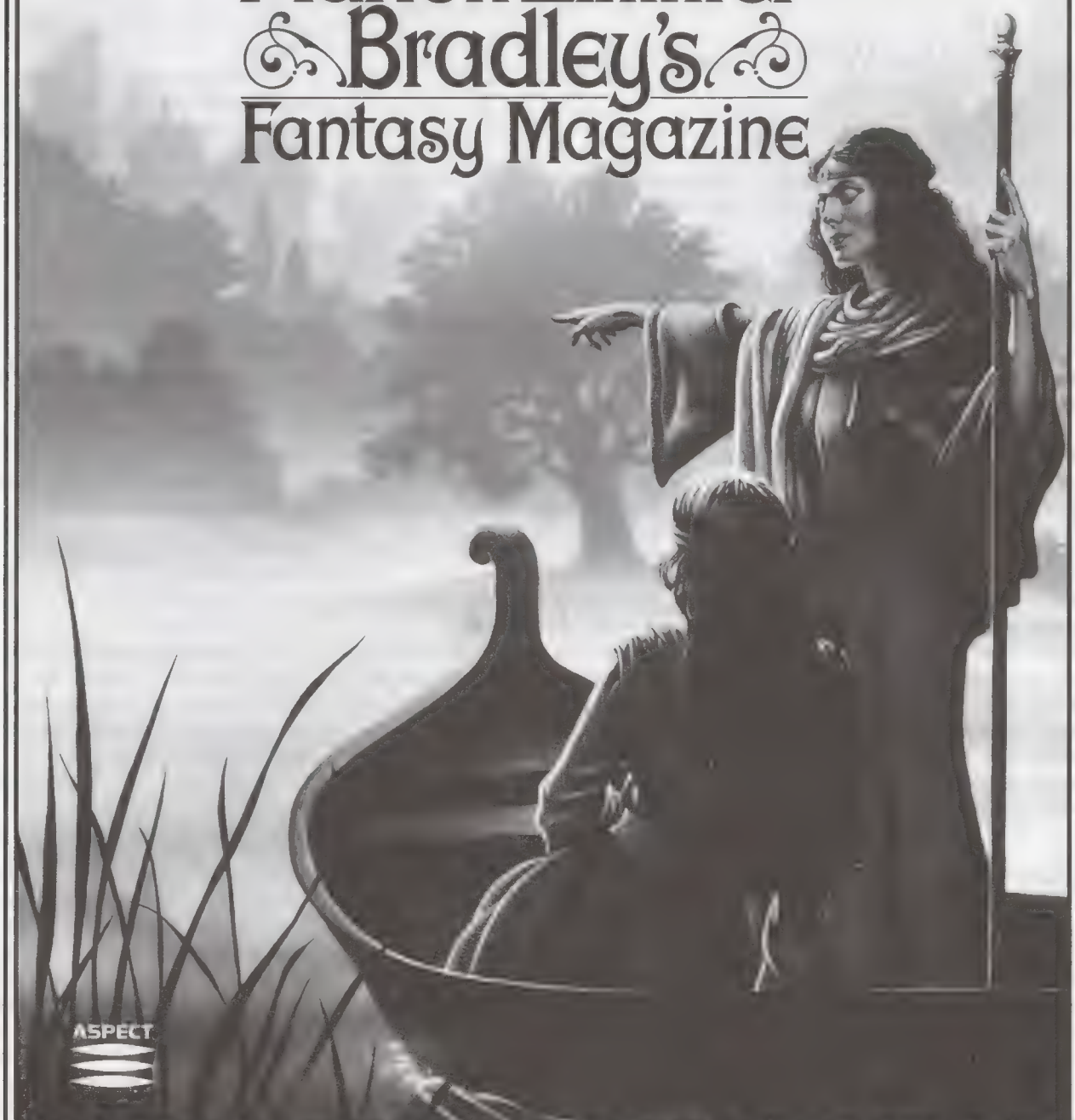

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Dream Breaker

by Wilda Gretzinger

The litmosaic moss cast its erratic patterned glow along the cave's damp walls and ceiling, barely defining the scrawny, ragged child rummaging among the wind-gathered leaves farthest from the small pool that centered the cave. The pool's outlet trickled like a web of thin, gleaming threads through the cave entrance and down a rock face to a stream below.

The hood of an ancient monk's habit fell back as the child continued to dig among the leaves to reveal by the moss's greenish hue a piquant, dirty face ringed by a tangled mass of hair.

"Ow!"

The single, startled exclamation escaped from the child. She — for even through the grime could be seen the delicately molded features of a female — held up her right forefinger to gaze stoically at the dark fluid oozing from four incised marks on the digit's end.

"You are there, all right. By the size of your teeth marks, you should make a nice-sized meal. All I have to do is tease you out of your hole and snap your neck."

The female child cast about her and located a slender stick as long as her arm. She grinned in feral anticipation. "This will do nicely."

Using the stick with a sweeping motion, the girl cleared a small area from the leaves to reveal a declivity under a narrow ledge of rock. She bent down to peer into the rim of darkness provided by the ledge. Two luminescent, round, drachma-sized globes blinked off and on nervously. A thin shaft suddenly shot out from the thing refuged there, barely missing the child's face and embedding its jagged, little point into a fold of the hood.

Receding to a safer distance the child bent down again and poked the thing with the stick.

A thin voice wailed, "Oh, no! Hurt me not! Hurt me not!"

Still poking at the dodging thing, the child said, "You hurt me. You bit my finger. Besides, I am hungry."

"Wait, wait!" the thing bleated. "I can give you food — and a special power."

The girl stopped her poking and squatted.

"You expect me to believe you! Still, my master once owned a goose that laid gold eggs."

The glowing orbs shone more and blinked less as the creature asked, "Where is the goose now?"

"He ate it."

"No more gold eggs?"

"That is right," she answered.

There was a slight, calculating change in the thin voice as it asked, "Does your finger hurt?"

The girl held her finger up and looked at it before answering. "Some."

The thing's voice spoke cajolingly. "I can fix it."

With that statement, its head thrust forward from the surrounding darkness. It was an owlish head without feathers which held the luminous orbs, and was topped with elongated, tufted ears. The dark nose hung over in a sharp point to almost touch the thick lips pulled back to reveal four long incisors protruding from toothsome jaws.

The girl did not flinch as she studied the grinning head, then made the observation, "You are an Azerakk. You must swear by your mother's tail that you will do as you promised me. Oh, and say exactly what you promised. That, the Teller of Tales said, was very important." She raised her stick in a threatening position. "I am still very hungry. Come out where I can see all of you."

"Yess, yess," the Azerakk answered and hurriedly complied with the child's wishes.

Its squirrel-sized body, like the head, was bare of feathers and, except for the ear tufts, of hair. The front legs ended in handlike appendages, with one "finger" of the three opposed on each hand. Its hind legs were rodentlike. What appeared to be a bushy tail were really sharp, barbed quills. A leather thong encircled its middle, holding a dark, cloth apron in place over its groin. The excess cloth hung down in front, acting as an extra flap. The Azerakk sat back on its haunches and stared unblinkingly at the girl.

"Food I promised. A special power I promised."

"Food I can eat and what I like," the girl child specified.

"Food you can eat and what you like," the Azerakk parroted.

The girl continued, "And the special power has got to be of the good powers, not the bad."

The Azerakk shook its head slightly. "That you must decide for yourself. Each power is a raw, elemental force. The power user must decide if it is to be used for good or for evil."

The girl said, "Well, what have you got to offer? Let us get this over with."

A wave of nausea and dizziness caused the girl to close her eyes tight to keep from swaying. The smell of hot potato broth brought her acutely alert. There before her on a round, silver tray was a full, steaming, china bowl of broth. Not bothering with the large spoon provided, the child grasped the bowl with both hands and noisily gulped down the contents. She wiped her mouth with a filthy sleeve before speaking. "I still feel awful hungry."

The Azerakk sighed.

"Yes, I knew you would. That was only an illusion."

"Is that how you plan to feed me? Letting me starve to death thinking I am eating my fill?"

"No, no," it answered quickly, a chill of fear rattling its tail quills. "Put forth your hurt finger to me."

Automatically, the child did so. The Azerakk held it gently, placed its mouth over the still oozing marks, and sucked strongly. A moment later it spit out what blood it had sucked and, reaching into its apron, brought forth a plain, gold ring and slid the ring onto the child's finger, where it fit snugly.

The girl child's finger no longer pained her. That, in itself, was a wonder. Even in this eerie light she could see that the ring the Azerakk gave her was of gold. She held the ringed hand to her breast. "Thank you, Azerakk."

It accepted her thanks with a nod, then said, "Now think of what you wish to eat, and rub your ring."

Aloud she spoke, "Some real potato broth with clumps of plump chicken meat in it, not too hot and not too cold — just right."

She rubbed the ring. This time the food was real, for when she disposed of it as she had the illusion, she felt the warmth in her belly and was satisfied.

"How was it?" it asked.

"Wonderful," she answered.

"Now for your special gift. Let me tell you about it."

"When do I get it?" she asked.

The Azerakk answered with a gleeful hop, "You have it already. When my saliva mingled with your blood, when you trusted me to heal your finger, my power was shared with you."

A puzzled frown creased her forehead. "I do not understand."

The Azerakk cocked its head to one side and asked, "Do you know what illusions are?"

"When you see something that really is not there?"

"That and more," it answered. "Illusions are but unconsciously fulfilled dreams of their beholder that can be projected by another — a sort of mind control."

Seeing her baffled expression, the Azerakk sighed and noted, "As you practice, your understanding and expertise will come in time."

"What will come in time, Azerakk?"

Its answer was stated simply enough. "You now have the power to disperse illusions. You are now a dreambreaker." The Azerakk contemplated the girl child solemnly. "Do you have a name?"

"No," she answered with a touch of sadness. "My master never gave me one."

With as much authority as his piping voice could muster, the Azerakk bade the child, "Kneel and receive your name."

As the girl child knelt before it, the Azerakk picked up the stick and muttered, "This will have to do."

Holding the stick as one would a sword, it dubbed the child on either shoulder. "I name thee the Lady Goldring Dreambreaker."

The girl child clasped both hands together and repeated her own new name, "The Lady Goldring Dreambreaker."

"So," the Azerakk said as he climbed onto Dreambreaker's shoulder. "We should leave this place now. I smell your master coming."

"Do you really smell my master?"

The Azerakk's matter-of-fact answer was, "Is your master the only giant ogre living in these parts?"

"As far as I know," Dreambreaker answered.

"Oops. There he is." So saying, the Azerakk scrambled down and hid in its old niche.

Dreambreaker called in a whisper to it. "Azerakk, what do I do?"

Its reedy voice advised, "Visualize a giant pitcher filled with very strong wine and rub your ring."

A giant ogre's head blocked the small cave's entrance and his voice boomed, "Hey, child, are you in there?"

He spied the pitcher and pulled his face away to reach in with a dirty, blood-stained hand to get the pitcher. There was a thud as the giant ogre seated himself on a hill and guzzled down the pitcher's complete contents. His belch rocked the ground.

"Good!" he bellowed. "Got to find girl child — kill her, eat her, like I eat parents. Promised the Waindoc to do this." He gave a great, noisy yawn. "Promised Waindoc, kill and eat. Kill...and...eat."

The earth shook terribly as the giant ogre fell.

Dreambreaker bent over to peer into the hollow and said, "You can come out now. It is safe."

A trembling voice answered her. "How do you know that?"

Her answer brought the Azerakk immediately forth. "When you told me to provide the great pitcher of strong wine, I added a powerful, tasteless poison. I think we should go home now."

"Go home?" asked the baffled Azerakk.

"To the used-to-be ogre's castle. It is the castle of the Lady Goldring Dreambreaker — by right of conquest."

"So it is," the beaming Azerakk agreed as he gained his perch on her shoulder. "And what is more, you beat

Artist: Lori Deitrick

the ogre without trying out your new power."

The two, Dreambreaker and Azerakk, left the cave. Already, huge flocks of ravens and vultures darkened the sky. The spires of a castle shone in the near distance. As they walked in the castle's direction, Dreambreaker said, "You must teach me all about what my power can do. You heard the ogre. He was ordered to kill my parents and me by — what was his name?"

A grim Azerakk answered. "Waindoc. The ogre said Waindoc. There is only one that I know of by that name. The Sorcerer Waindoc is the most evil in all of Larthro."

Up the dusty path a ragged-clothed waif ran to them, calling as he came. "You, girl, you must hide. Our master hunts for you."

Dreambreaker recognized him as another of the ogre's slaves, a young boy of seven or eight who sometimes accompanied her in the ash pits. She pointed to the sky filled with carrion birds. "Look at the sky, boy. The ogre is dead." She drew herself up, beginning to overcome the feeling of uncertainty brought by her newly acquired status. "I claim this castle by right of conquest," she said imperiously. "I shall expect a fitting welcome."

The boy, beginning to caper about, exclaimed with awe, "That right you well have. How shall I proclaim you?"

The girl child drew her shabby monk's robe about her and commanded, "You shall announce the coming of your Mistress, the Lady Goldring Dreambreaker and her Lord Chancellor, Lord — Lord Fang Azerakk. Now go."

As the boy dashed off, the Azerakk, with an amused gleam in his eyes, murmured, "Fang?"

Dreambreaker answered sheepishly. "It was the only thing I could think of — on account of my finger."

"It will do nicely," Fang assured her. "Now, Goldring, visualize how you want to appear to your new subjects and rub your ring."

❄

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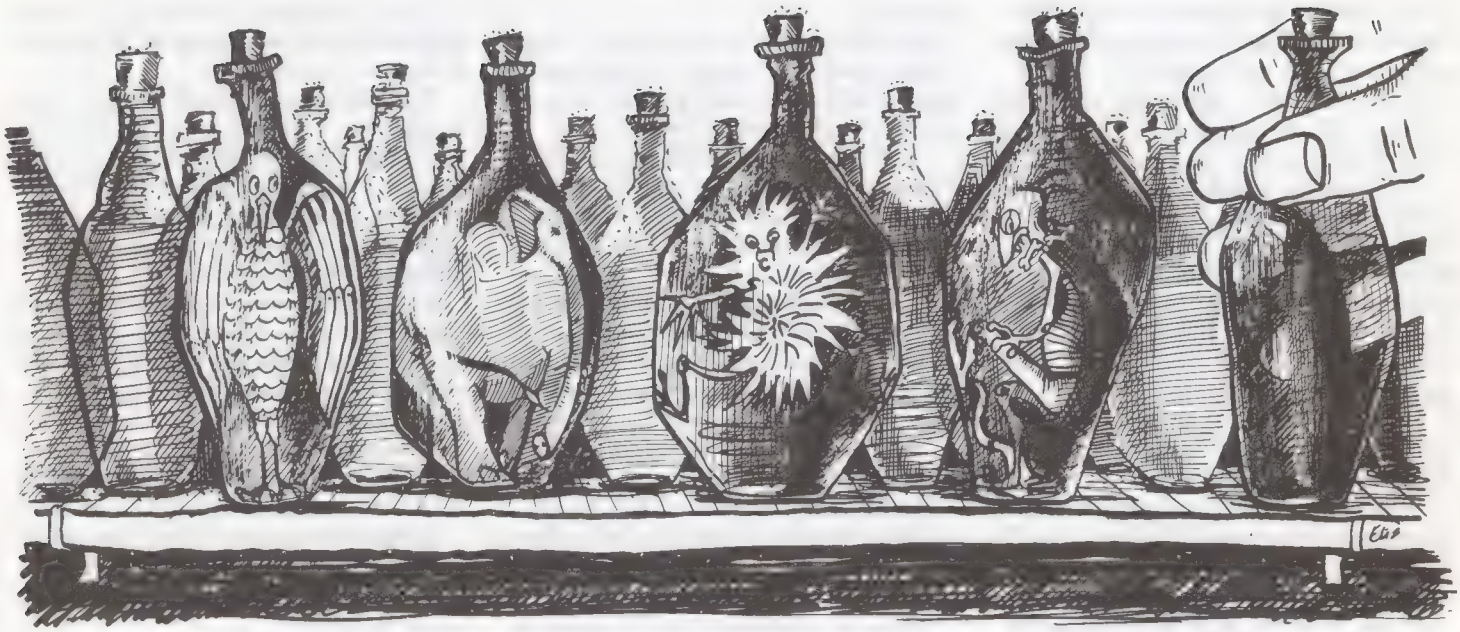

Artwork by Elizabeth Hope Shaw

Pennies For A Princess

by Ryan G. Van Cleave

I look through the glass walls of my bottle and see dozens of other bottles similar to my own along the shelf beside me, each complete with a single creature. A tiny red dust devil, a miniature lizard man with a gray bone necklace, a silver bird with what look to be metal wings, and a midget blue elephant all sit within their respective bottles, apparently realizing the futility of escape attempts. After pounding on the walls until my hands are raw and sore, I, too, sit down and huddle deeper into my robe. I just hope my father, Cademon the Gray, will rescue me before long. It isn't much fun being cooped up like this.

I had awakened around midnight at the sound of something winging its way past my open window. I jumped out of bed and mentally readied a shielding spell in case some winged demon was trying to enter my bedchambers. Against the pale blue phosphorescence of the moon, I was barely able to make out the silhouette of a tiny dragon laboring its way through the air. As the little reptile's shape disappeared into the blackness of the night, I realized that it looked exactly like Father's pseudo-dragon, Priam.

In fact, I was *sure* it was Priam.

I was tempted to use a winged-boot spell to give chase, but even though Priam's small wings made him a slow flier, he had too big a head start for me to catch him easily. With a sigh of regret, I settled back into my bed.

What would Priam be doing out at this hour? I wondered. Maybe he was on some errand for Father, but that didn't make sense. The only missions a wizard's familiar was sent on at night were of sorcerous, demonic, or necromantic nature — but Father solely used thaumaturgy and conjuration so his soul wouldn't be damned. Priam must be acting of his own accord. I had never truly trusted that wily beast. He seemed far too cocky and clever for his own good.

As I curled deeper into the wool blankets, I resolved to pay more attention to Priam's behavior. I would catch that little sneak if he was up to mischief. Father would be so proud!

The next evening at nearly the same hour, I heard the distinct flapping sound again. This time, however, I was ready. I had my cloak of weapon protection, magical winged boots, and a pair of newly respelled night-vision goggles. I waited until Priam flew a few hundred feet past my window before I set off after him. It was easy to follow him with the swift boots and the goggles.

I followed a good quarter-mile behind Priam — pseudo-dragons' auditory and extraordinary senses were legendary. Apparently I was far enough behind to remain unnoticed.

I watched as Priam circled a dirty alley on the city's north side before he dove down out of sight. I waited for twenty heartbeats before plunging after him. I settled about half a block away from Priam, who was engaged in conversation with a black-robed man who had the unmistakable aura of a sorcerer. I was wary of sorcerers after hearing of their mysterious powers of

mind control and manipulation. Sorcery was outlawed in our city, and with good reason, I understood.

Priam accepted a small bag from the man which he attached to the thin leather belt he wore around his waist.

This was too much. Priam was obviously moonlighting as a sorcerer's pet or errand-boy, and I wasn't about to allow it to happen. I called to mind a stunning spell and let it fly at the sorcerer. The spell cracked against his head, sending the foul man into a temporary drunkenlike stupor.

I flew over to Priam and hovered over him, effectively keeping him from escaping into the air.

"Priam! How dare you associate with a sorcerer! What would Father think?" I demanded, placing my hands firmly against my hips.

Priam cowered against the ground, begging forgiveness. "I'm sorry, good master. It's just that he pays me to deliver packages to and from his associates. It's only a few pennies, sir, but I need the money so desperately."

I shook my head in disgust.

"Only a few pennies? What on earth do you need money for?"

Priam lowered his shiny gray head in shame. He looked positively pathetic.

"I need the pennies to buy the freedom of a pseudo-dragon I knew from years ago. She's held in thrall by an animal trainer who wishes to sell her to a traveling circus. I can't allow that to happen — she's a princess of our kind."

I wasn't about to let him off the hook so easily.

"But that's no excuse to moonlight for this...this type of person!" I sputtered, exasperated by his deeds. "Why didn't you just ask Father for the money? He might've been willing to lend it to you, at least."

Priam shook his head.

"I don't think so, young master. He was reluctant to lend me money last summer to help my sick grandmother. He seems to believe I'll gamble it away or something."

"And with good reason!" I reminded him. "You do gamble most of your monthly wages away, Priam."

"Yes, but that's different. I really do need the money for something noble this— Watch out, sir! The sorcerer!"

I spun in the air, ready to take on the foul sorcerer, but he was too quick. My stunning spell had apparently given out, leaving him free to cast spells of his own.

As I frantically tried to call up a flame-death spell, the slender, pasty-faced man grabbed a clear bottle from an unseen pocket and opened it.

I stampeded through the incantation as a rotten green mist spewed forth, engulfing and choking me. "Vitrius... <cough>...Spac Mun... <cough>... Ho..."

And before I was able to utter the last syllable of the final word, Hochi, I felt the strange sensation of being shrunken and sucked into something. I was being pulled into the bottle like a djinni!

I resisted with all my might, but the pull was too strong.

As the sorcerer corked the bottle, I thought I heard Priam say as he flew off into the night sky, "I'll fetch your father. Cademon will save you!"

I saw no more because the sorcerer dropped the bottle I was stuck inside into a deep, dark pocket. I tried to stay awake, but a magical lethargy took hold of my body and sent me into a deep slumber.

When I awoke, I was still inside the bottle. It seemed that I was on a dusty wooden shelf within the sorcerer's laboratory. There was a huge stone table in the middle of the room, and a number of vials filled with various liquids sat on it. An elaborately-carved oak bookcase stood against the wall opposite me, absolutely stuffed with old, dilapidated tomes of what I guessed were ancient sorcerous texts. The sorcerer, however, was nowhere in sight.

I didn't like being in the bottle. I began to feel incredibly claustrophobic. My stomach was queasy and my head began to hurt. I needed out.

I must've sat there for some time before deciding to see what was in the other bottles on the shelf with me. That's when I saw the lizard man and the others. I decided to try to talk to him, for lack of anything better to do until my father came to rescue me.

I banged my heel against the side of the bottle; unfortunately, the bottles must have been spelled to keep sound out because I couldn't hear anything. The lizard man finally clambered to his feet and stretched, yawning so mightily that I could see the first two rows of sharp fangs. I wouldn't want to get bitten by a creature like that!

It peered through the glass at me and nodded slightly, apparently trying to let me know that it was listening. I cupped my hands around my mouth and screamed into the glass: "How long have you been here?"

The lizard man looked puzzled. For a moment, I thought he couldn't understand Common Speech, but then he motioned with his hands to slow down.

"How...long...have...you...been...here?" I yelled, taking care to enunciate each word as best as I could.

The lizard man shrugged. He opened his mouth and tried to say something back, though I couldn't hear a word. I waved my hand for him to repeat it, so I could watch his mouth better.

He repeated it four more times before I felt that I understood. Boy, he was better at lip-reading than I was!

I believe he asked, "What year is it?"

I held up one finger, then two, then nine, and then three. 1293. Why did he want to know?

He tried to say something, but, again, I had to have it repeated. Eventually, I realized what he was trying to say.

"I've been here since 769, give or take a year. Have a seat, boy. You're going to be here a while."

I sank to my knees in disbelief. He'd been trapped in a bottle for over five hundred years? Since I was already on my knees, I said a quick prayer to any god who would lend a kind ear to have my father rescue me before long. I had a date next Thursday, after all! Hopefully, though, Priam would be here soon with help.

The door to the laboratory opened, and the black-robed sorcerer deposited another occupied bottle on the shelf next to the lizard man, then he turned and walked over to me. He peered into my bottle, the curved glass emphasizing his bulbous nose to heroic proportions. His skin was smooth and pale and his sharp jade eyes shone with amusement. He tapped the side of my bottle with a well-scrubbed finger.

I looked up at him, placing my hands on my hips in defiance.

"What's your name?" he asked.

I started to tell him, but then I remembered the flame death spell I had attempted earlier. I could still feel its aura lingering around him. All it needed was the final word to detonate!

I stifled a grin with my hand as I yelled, "Hochi!"

The sorcerer rubbed at his whiskered chin.

"What? What did you say?"

"Ho...chi! Hochi!"

"Ho...chi? What type of name is

Hochi supposed..."

But his words were cut short as the final word to the spell caused his body to erupt in blue flames. The sorcerer jumped back and flailed his arms about wildly, shrieking and howling as his skin charred. After only a few moments, he banged into the stone table and fell to the floor where he lay still. Thin wisps of blue smoke trailed into the air from his blackened form.

I had done it! I had killed a sorcerer! Father would be so happy!

I wore a smile that positively radiated satisfaction as I turned and looked at the newcomer. It was Priam. This was getting better and better!

I waved wildly until I had his attention. I asked what had happened to him, and it only took two tries for me to get my point across. He tried to answer, but it was much harder to read a dragon's lips than a lizard man's!

After nine or ten tries — with a little help from the lizard man — I was able to figure out what Priam said.

"I never reached Cademon. Markus — that's the sorcerer — called on a winged demon to chase me down and catch me with one of his damned bottles."

"Well, someone's got to come along sooner or later," I said hopefully.

Priam shook his serpentine head.

"I'm afraid not. This is Markus's secret lab under Citadel Mountain. He didn't trust anyone — no one else know where it is."

Citadel Mountain was off in the ruins of the old city. It was forbidden to enter it under penalty of death.

I shuddered as I realized what I had done — I had killed the only person who knew where we were. We were trapped and no one knew it.

"What should we do?" I asked with a touch of fear in my voice.

Priam shrugged his little dragon shoulders.

"Get comfortable?"

❄

Ryan G. Van Cleave lives in DeKalb, Illinois. His work has previously appeared in *ESC!*, *Writers' Journal*, and *Reader's Review* but this is his first appearance in *FANTASY Magazine*.

Elizabeth Hope Shaw most recently held a job as manager of the calligraphy team for the marketing department of a supermarket chain. Earlier this year she return to the illustration field and is working on a series of miniature classic children's books.

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The Potion Maker

by Quinn Weller

Gerta shrank back into the doorway of the apothecary, sucking in her breath with all her strength. Vron passed within inches of her, remaining utterly unaware of her trembling presence. Gerta blinked hard as tears of familiar humiliation rose in her eyes. She would have to run into him today, of all days! His farm was far from the village; he was seldom seen in town. Gerta sighed, snorted angrily, and shook herself, glaring at Vron's adored back.

"Just you wait!" she whispered furiously. "Only a few more hours: the Witch Woman promised. The next time I see you, you'll notice me!"

Gerta gathered her bundles and hurried out of the village. The path to the Witch Woman's cottage was steep and not well-worn, but to Gerta's feet, the steps were automatic. Three years of climbing up and down nearly every day; three years of running endless errands for the taciturn Witch Woman who would never be bothered to ask for more than a few items at a time. But the three years were over today, and Gerta would at last receive her long-awaited reward.

She looked up the mountain at the tumbledown cottage. How well she remembered the terror of her first climb, so many climbs ago! A mere child of sixteen then, she'd huffed and puffed the entire journey: a frightened, chubby girl with downcast eyes and stuttering speech. She'd come early in the day, before her resolve had a chance to fade, and found the Witch Woman puttering in her garden.

"Well?" snapped the old woman, when at last Gerta had cleared her throat loudly enough to draw attention.

"I — I've come for a p-potion," Gerta had stammered. "A beauty potion."

The Witch Woman frowned, snorted with disgust. "Naturally," she smirked. "All the young ladies come for the beauty potions." A trace of bitterness creased her forehead; then she went on. "And might I ask who is the object of your affections?"

"His name is Vron," said Gerta. "He's from a distant farm. But he doesn't even know who I am." Gerta stared at her feet, shame twisting her tongue into uselessness. "I'm so fat and ugly, and he comes to the village rarely. He — he only has time for beautiful women." Gerta courageously glared into the old woman's eyes, but lost some of her intended defiance to surprise at finding sympathy there. "I want a potion to make me beautiful. I want to be absolutely irresistible to men. I want to be so lovely that men fall in love with me instantly." She finished in a rush, stopping abruptly, waiting for the Witch Woman to decide her fate.

The Witch Woman had gazed intently at Gerta for an uncomfortable moment. Then she smiled faintly.

"A beauty potion such as you request does not exist in this world," she said finally. "Magic isn't all-powerful, you know. There are limits. But a potion can be made which will make you irresistible to Vron. All men may not find you so, but Vron will. Will that be sufficient for you?"

"Oh, yes!" Gerta had said eagerly. "It's enough for Vron to think I'm beautiful! How much does the potion cost?"

The Witch Woman shook her head with a laugh. "More than you can afford, child." She looked Gerta over critically. "A plump little thing...hmmm. But then, you never know," she speculated. Gerta's muscles almost hummed in anticipation. Finally, the Witch spoke again. "The potion you request is very dear. It will require much of my time for many months. It will be necessary for me to put aside my own important work in order to prepare it. There is no amount of money — at least, no amount that you could possible access — that would suffice."

"But I must have the potion!" cried Gerta in despair. "I'll do anything to get it! Just tell me how much you need."

"Three years," said the Witch. "I need three years."

Gerta, puzzled, shook her head in confusion. "Three years? I don't understand."

"You can keep my cottage clean. There is the garden which will need tending while I am busy with your potion. There are errands to be run, mending, fixing, cooking...you can attend to these chores so that I am free to make your potion."

Gerta hesitated. Three years seemed such a long time to the girl. She imagined Vron growing old while she toiled for the Witch. But then she pictured herself, sleek and winsome; pictured Vron's eyes alighting on her for the first time; pictured his delight at meeting her. "Very well," she said. "I agree. I want to work for the potion."

The Witch Woman flung the hoe at the child. "Get to work, then," she snapped, without a hint of kindness. "There are seeds to be planted."

But all the months of tedium and fatigue were over at last. Gerta burst through the cottage door, tossed her parcels on the table, and confronted the Witch.

"The day has come, Witch Woman!" she cried triumphantly. "Give me the potion!"

The Witch wordlessly pushed a small vial toward Gerta. Without stopping to

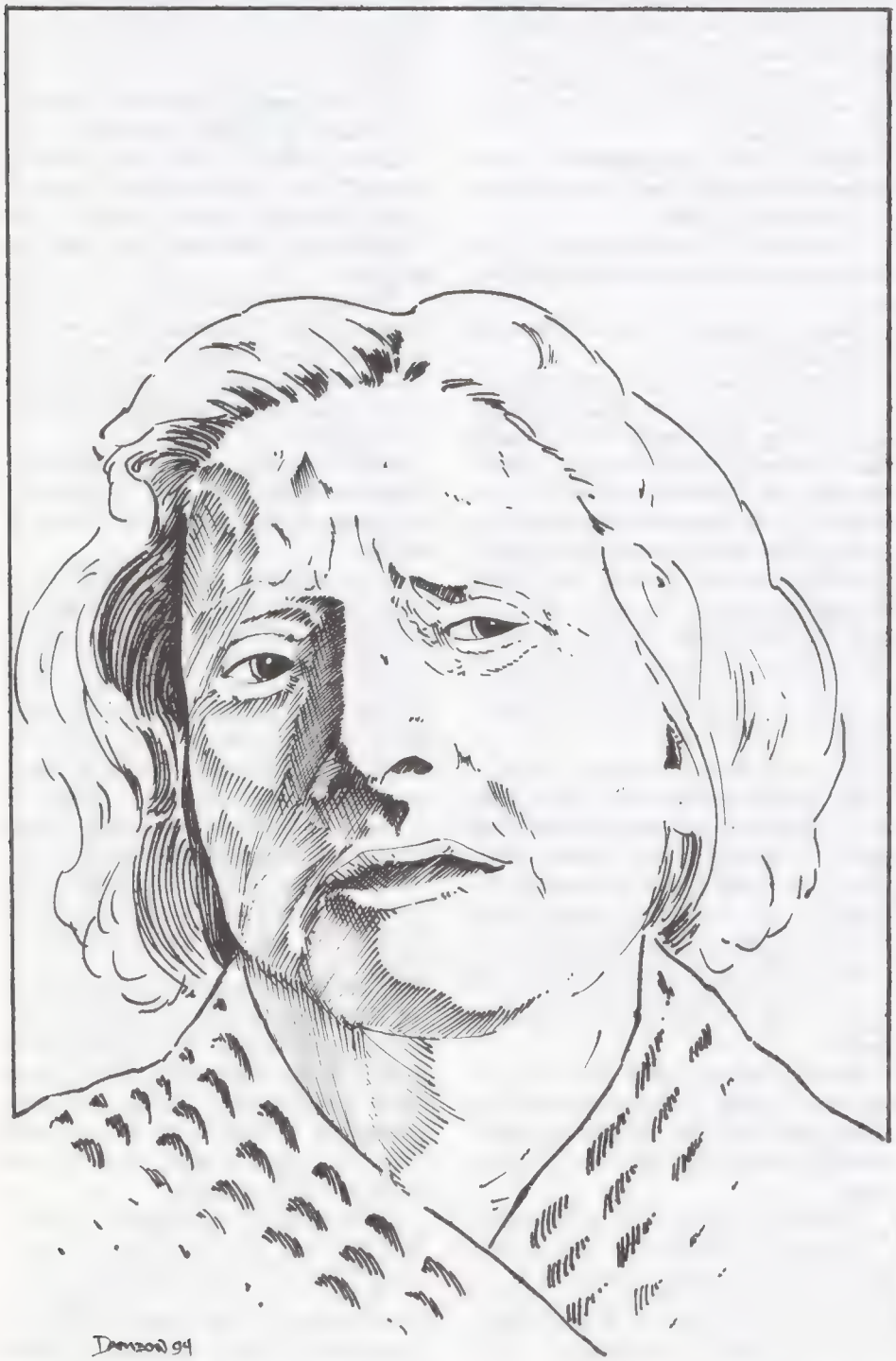
ask if there mightn't be any special directions, Gerta uncapped the vial and swallowed its contents in one gulp. It tasted like water, and she threw it against the wall in fury. "You cheated me!" she shrieked.

"Did I?" asked the Witch mildly. "Take a look in the mirror."

Gerta rushed to the mirror and gasped. Her once pudgy body, unyielding even to the months of labor for the Witch, was now slender and eminently feminine. Her mouse-brown, frazzled hair was a cascade of ebony-black, shining and smooth. Her eyes sparkled green, and when she smiled, her teeth were blindingly white.

She was breathtakingly beautiful. Gerta knelt at the Witch's feet. "Thank you so much," she said, nearly weeping for joy. "I can't thank you enough."

"It *is* enough!" The Witch Woman pushed Gerta back. "Go now! Go to your beloved!"



Artwork by Dameon Willich

The Witch Woman was only alone for a month until she saw the newly ravishing Gerta toiling once more up the path. The old woman was once again in her garden, and she made Gerta shuffle in embarrassment for several minutes before she looked up.

"Well?" snapped the Witch.

"I — I need your advice," stammered Gerta, feeling sixteen and stupid again.

"What is it now? Aren't you satisfied with the potion? Are you not the young man's ideal?"

"Oh, yes," Gerta assured her. "The potion worked perfectly. Vron is mad for me. It's just that — well — it's..." She sighed, blushed, and stopped trying to address the Witch's face. "I didn't realize that in the three years while I was here, earning the potion, Vron had taken a wife. There is a child as well." Gerta stamped. "I didn't want to destroy anyone's life. But he's left his family, of course, to be with me. Now his wife is miserable, and his child has no father, and the whole village hates me."

"And what do you want of me?" asked the Witch Woman coldly.

"I want another potion," said Gerta. "I want a potion to make her forget about Vron and love someone else. She's beautiful enough without any potion," she added bitterly. "I want her to be free of Vron so that she can find happiness with someone else and I won't — "

"You won't have to feel guilty," finished the Witch Woman.

Gerta nodded. The Witch stared at her again, that same intent scrutiny that she'd endured three years before. Finally the old woman spoke.

"The guilt-absolving potion you request does not exist in this world," she said. "I told you before: magic isn't all-powerful. No potion can make her forget her love for Vron. But there is a potion which can improve her life, which can ensure that she and her child will never know need. And, although she cannot be charmed into forgetting Vron, this potion can include a spell to make her receptive if another man should happen to enter her life. If she is as beautiful as you say, this should not be unlikely. Will that be sufficient for you?"

"Yes," affirmed Gerta. "Even if she misses Vron, I won't feel so bad if I

know she can be happy with someone else. What must I pay you for this potion?"

"How little you have learned!" exclaimed the Witch. "You should know by now that potions are not easily made. You cannot pay me in money for this one any more than you could the other!"

Gerta steeled herself and queried, "What do you ask of me this time?"

"Seven years," said the Witch without a qualm.

"Seven? Seven years!" Gerta was indignant. "Old woman, you ask too much of me! I would lose all my youth if I stayed to work for you another seven years! And what of Vron? He cannot stay with me here."

"Vron will wait for you; he has no choice," said the Witch Woman dryly. "You are asking me to postpone my own work even longer. What is it worth to you to be able to spend the rest of your days with him without the bother of guilt, without the accusing looks from the villagers, the hatred of his wife? You are a young woman; seven years will not make you old. I have named my price. Make your choice."

Seven years later, Gerta, older but no less beautiful, was flying down the mountain with another vial: the potion for Vron's former wife. The years had been long, but not as tedious as the previous three. The Witch Woman had added some bits of interest to the monotony of running errands and weeding the garden. Soon after Gerta had returned to the cottage, the Witch had begun teaching Gerta a bit of herb lore. Gerta surprised herself by taking quite an interest in her studies, and grew to enjoy her excursions into the woods to search for wild plants and mushrooms. She even found herself looking forward to the winter evenings spent by the fireplace, poring over musty texts of recipes for simple potions. After seven years, Gerta had become adept at mixing basic medicinal concoctions, and was pleased that she had gained something besides her promised payment. She ran as quickly as she could, so anxious to see Vron again that the journey seemed endless.

A whole season passed this time before Gerta returned, but the Witch Woman showed no surprise to see Gerta treading wearily into the garden, her face a definition of dejection.

"Well?" said the old woman quietly.

"I need another potion," said Gerta tiredly. "I don't care what the price is. I'll work for you as long as need be."

"What's the matter now?" chuckled the Witch. "Didn't the potion do enough to assuage your guilt?"

"It's not that," explained Gerta. "The potion worked perfectly. It wasn't as difficult as I expected to get Vron's former wife to drink it, and now things are much better for her. She received a large inheritance unexpectedly, and she and the child have moved into a comfortable house. The landlord is a widower, and he has taken an interest in her welfare. I think it likely that they will soon marry."

"Then, is Vron the problem?" questioned the Witch. "Isn't he as infatuated with you as ever?"

"Yes, he is," hesitated Gerta, "but that's just it. He's infatuated with me, and I — "

"You no longer love him," finished the Witch Woman.

"No!" asserted Gerta. "I do still love him! It's just that..." She hesitated again, then continued. "Well," said Gerta defiantly, "I'm not the same foolish child I was when I first fell in love with him. I've been studying with you, and now I have interests, and wisdom." The Witch snorted at this, and Gerta dropped her eyes. "I need another potion," she said sadly. "A potion to make him smarter. He is still only a farmer; strong and handsome, but somewhat dense. I want him to be more intellectual."

The Witch Woman began to laugh. "Silly child!" she snickered. "You know that I cannot make Vron an intellectual with any potion!" She sobered then. "But I can make him seem more interesting to you. I can give you a potion which will help you to find a common ground with him, make you find things to love about him again, make you happy to be his mate. Will that suffice?"

Gerta raised her eyes. "How long?" she asked softly. "I know without you telling me that this will be the most difficult one of all. Just tell me how long."

The Witch Woman bowed her head. "This potion will be very dear. It will be so difficult I may never be able to return to my real work that I have put off so long for your sake. I cannot do it alone. I will need your help for much of the work."

"How long?"

"Sixteen years."

Gerta's eyes brimmed with tears. "I will be too old by then," she wept. "It will be too late for anything."

"Too late to love a husband whose company you enjoy?" the Witch pressed her.

"Sixteen years."

In spite of no longer having the energy of youth, Gerta was able to climb the path in good time. It had been barely a week since she had left. She was surprised to find the garden empty, the Witch Woman nowhere in sight. She entered the cottage, and there the Witch lay, moaning slightly by the fire.

Gerta rushed to her side. "What's wrong?" she cried in alarm. She had understandably become fond of the Witch in the years they had spent together.

"Wrong?" smiled the Witch Woman. "I am old, child. I was old when we first met, and now I am ancient. But why have you returned? Has one of my potions failed at last? Are you and Vron estranged?"

Gerta sighed, a burden of weariness fastened on her shoulders. "Vron and I are more in love than ever," she said sadly.

"Then why are you unhappy?"

Gerta paced wildly away from the old woman's bedside. "You lied to me!" she accused. "You said sixteen years would not be too late, but you lied! Look at me: I am past forty now. I want to be young again. I want to bear a child. I need another potion to make me a girl again, and Vron a boy! It doesn't matter how long it takes, how many years you force from me. If I have the potion of youth, Vron and I can start over again at the end of my indenturing. We can get back all the lost years!"

The Witch Woman tried to laugh, but fell back weakly. Even so, her face was smitten with mirth. "There is no potion of youth, my dear child. You cannot make me think that you are still naive enough to believe there is. You and Vron are middle-aged; nothing can make you young again."

Gerta groaned in despair. "I don't believe you, Witch! You must know something you're refusing to tell me."

"Calm down, child," chuckled the Witch. "I didn't say there was no hope. There is no potion to give you back your lost years, but there is a potion which can see that you and Vron have

many, many more years to come. A potion to make you live long past the normally allotted span. And you can make enough for Vron, too."

"Then, let's get started," declared Gerta with new hope. "I know you'll say that this is the hardest of all, so we should begin right away."

But the old woman didn't stir from her bed. "I cannot help you this time, child," whispered the Witch. "I spent many years searching for the formula, but I stopped looking when I met you. I have made my last potion. I told you long ago: magic isn't all-powerful. I used my knowledge of herbs to detain Death as long as I could, but I have no potion to stave Him off forever. You will have to make this potion for yourself."

"No!" shouted Gerta. "You can't leave me now! I haven't the knowledge! I don't know how to make the potion!"

"You may succeed, eventually, where I have failed." The Witch Woman's voice trailed off. "You have all my books, records of my attempts, my spells. It may take you many years of study, but you may find the right recipe, one day."

"Wait!" pleaded Gerta. "I'm not ready yet! I don't know enough!" But the Witch Woman was dead.

Many years had passed since anyone had visited Gerta in the cottage. She spent so much of her time in reading, studying, planting herbs, and experimenting with her potions that she scarcely noticed the passing of time. She was old now, and subject to aches, especially in the small of her back. She was arched over, rubbing the sore place, when the girl caught her attention. The child was a scrawny thing, all knees and elbows and jerking gawkiness — not ugly, exactly, but certainly unattractive.

"Well?" snapped Gerta, annoyed at the intrusion.

"W-Witch Woman," stammered the child. "I need a potion."

Gerta flung back her head and laughed.

The child, alarmed, drew back, but spoke again determinedly. "I need a beauty potion," she stated firmly. "It's because of my older brother's best friend." The child dropped her eyes, directing the rest of her speech to her feet. "I love him so much," she said softly. "He doesn't have any idea. To him, I'm just a silly child." The girl stepped forward, pleading, "Please, Witch Woman. I need a potion to make me irresistible to men. Please, tell me the cost. Tell me, how much do you need?"

Gerta stared at the child, scrutinizing every awkward angle. She thought of the years of work she still needed on her own potion. She thought of Vron, still waiting far away, if he lived at all.

She thought of the child, the new apprentice. She straightened, decisions trembling in her vertebrae.

"Three years," said the Witch Woman. "I need three years."

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QUINN WELLER lives with her husband and baby daughter near Indianapolis. After eleven years (and five majors) in college, she became a librarian to avoid having to limit herself to a single field of interest.

DAMEON WILLICH lives in Seattle and has been active in the Northern Lights, an artists' group based there.

Artwork by Dameon Willich

Away He Run

by Camille Allen LaGuire

Tom hated rain. The cold, wet rattle of it muffled the sound of his parents' voices. He crouched on the top step and listened.

"Tom?" called Dad. "Come on, Tom. It's time to go!"

They were putting on their raincoats, and neither had looked up yet. They had not seen him, but they would look up at any moment. If they saw him, he would have to come. He felt the old panic begin. He'd been wrong to put off thinking about it. Now he couldn't think at all. He just wanted to run.

His mother turned, about to look up. He scrambled around the corner and pressed his back against the wall. Her voice came to him softly from the bottom of the steps.

"George," she was saying. "He just ran away."

"Oh, no," said Dad. "Not again."

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. The fourth step creaked. Tom pulled open the linen closet and slipped in backwards, not quite pulling it shut behind him. He did not want the sound of the click to give him away.

"Tom?" His father was halfway up the stairs. "I thought you were over this."

"George, wait. Maybe...he doesn't like the treatments."

"Who would?"

"Maybe we should postpone the appointment..."

"No!"

His father's voice was near and loud. Tom cringed into the sheets. He wished he could flatten himself to nothing, slip under the sheets and never be found.

"He can hear us," said Mom.

"I'm sorry." Dad's voice was quieter, but there was still an edge to it. "I just don't want to have to go through this again. It's the last appointment." Mom was silent, and after a pause, Dad continued. "Dr. Minas is right, and we've got to make a man out of him..."

"He's young yet."

"Not all that young, and he's getting older all the time. Look, I'll check out the bedrooms, you watch the stairs."

"Let's both just sit here and wait for him to come out."

"He's not going to come out."

"Yes he will. Come on. Sit down. It calms him to hear our voices."

Dad let out an exasperated sigh, and neither made a sound for several seconds. Tom leaned ever so slowly to see through the crack. Mom was sitting on the top step, facing down. Dad was leaning on the railing with an air of dejection.

"He hasn't done this for three visits," he said softly.

"He just couldn't take it anymore, George. It must be very painful."

"You think so?"

"Honestly, George!" said Mom, looking at him sharply. "How insensitive can you be? Of course it hurts. Why would he act this way if it didn't hurt? Tom, honey? Tom, I've got your Mr. Mouse. He'll be there and so will we. Tom?"

She was looking in the wrong direction, calling for him down the hall toward his bedroom. Her lilting voice cracked as she held up the cuddly gray mouse. Tom felt a sudden coldness. If he was to be a man, he would not want a toy like that anymore.

"I wish we'd never started this," said Dad, to himself. Mom turned to him angrily.

"Well, *I* don't!"

Now they were going to fight. Right in front of him. And he was trapped in this closet. He half rose up from the sheets, looking for a place to go.

"How could you say that? Don't you love him?"

"I was thinking of him when I said it." Dad's footsteps moved down the hall, away from both of them. "I'm going to look for him."

Tom felt that jittery panic. Now he was going to be trapped in that car in the

Artwork by Bing Burnham

middle of a cold angry fight. He had to get further away, to the attic.

Dad would be looking under the beds by now. Mom never chased him. She would be watching the stairs anyway, maybe sulking. She wouldn't even see him if he didn't make noise. He pushed the door open slowly. She was looking the other way, sitting on the step, leaning forward. He carefully set one foot down, and then the other.

She suddenly sat up, throwing her head back with one sharp shuddering sob. Tom jumped. Mom turned and saw him. She tried to smile. A little crooked half-smile.

"Tom? Oh, Tom." She rolled to her knees. Tom turned and dashed for the attic ladder. "George! He's here!"

Dad came out of the bedroom. Tom glanced down to see him stop, helpless anger on his face.

"Christ, Janice, you know shouting scares him."

"What about your shouting?"

Tom slammed the trapdoor shut and sat on it. Their voices were muffled. Were they arguing? Sometimes they shouted but got over it. And sometimes, even when they talked normally, they just got worse.

He wanted to get higher, further, not just out of sight, out of reach. He looked at the trunks and boxes. There was a tall wardrobe by the window. He could climb the curtains to get to the top of it. That was stupid. The rod couldn't hold his weight, and what kind of a hiding place was it anyway?

He tried to be reasonable, but the voices below had stopped, and he could hear the ladder creak. He looked out the window. The rain blurred the view of the backyard. It was a gable window, and though he could not get down, he could get onto the roof.

He pushed up the window. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, but it was cold. He hesitated. The trapdoor behind him moved. He scrambled out, ignoring the dirty water and crawled up to sit beside the gable.

It was only a second before he heard the window open further. He started to sidle up higher.

"No, Tom. I won't chase you!" said Dad. Tom could see his fingers wrapped around the corner of the gable. Then his father's face appeared, strained and already wet, as he leaned out to see the boy. "I *promise* I won't come any further."

Tom stopped. The drizzle was getting through his clothes and hair now, and besides, he believed his father. Tom hugged himself and crouched where he was. Dad waited a moment.

"Are you all right now?"

"Yes."

Dad let out a small sigh of relief. "Will you come down now?"

Tom did not answer.

"What's wrong?"

"I..." Tom didn't know how to say what was wrong. "I'll change."

"But it's a good change."

"I can't remember how to purr!" Tom shouted and shook the water off his hands. He wanted to hiss and spit. Dad looked like he had been hit in the face with a cold bucket of water. He swallowed, and opened his mouth to reply, but at first no sound came out. He shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Tom." He said it so quietly that Tom calmed down. "I never would have started this if I had known what we were putting you through. It's just that...we wanted a child so badly, and you were such a sweet little lost kitten. When Dr. Minas said she could change you... Do you really hate being a human?".

"That's not it," said Tom. "It's better to be a human. Really. But this time... I'll forget *everything*, won't I?"

"No, Tom. Of course you won't forget everything."

"What kind of cat was I, then? Why can't I remember that?"

"You were a brown tabby kitten, with green gold eyes. You were only three weeks old. That's why you don't remember."

Tom wiped his hand over his fine brown hair. It was still the grayish color of a cat.

"Will my eyes still be green gold?"

"Yes. You'll still be you. You'll just lose some of your wilder urges. You won't be so mean to Jimmy Stimpson."

"I won't ever be mean to him again. I...I didn't know better. I *know* now."

"But if you were fully human, it wouldn't be a matter of what you know. You wouldn't have to fight it."

"And I won't like to play with Mr. Mouse anymore."

"Of course you will."

"You sure?"

"You'll play with him more. You'll know how to love him, the way your mother and I love you."

Tom shook the water off his hands and fidgeted. "But how do you know I love you when I can't purr?"

Dad laughed. "Humans have other ways of purring," he said. "Maybe you can't see that until you are fully human."

"I know you love me," he admitted.

"That's right," said Dad. "So come on down now."

Tom started to move, but froze when he looked down at the roof, sloping away to the backyard so far down.

"I can't"

"Come on. You got up there. You can get down."

"I'm scared."

"Turn around and come backwards. That's it."

Tom slowly backed down the roof. Dad slipped an arm around his waist when he got close enough and pulled him in. Mom was waiting right behind him. As soon as Tom was inside, she grabbed him and hugged him.

"That's a purr," said Dad. Mom looked puzzled, so he explained. "Humans purr in lots of ways."

"Oh," she said, "like laughing. Maybe after this you'll be able to laugh." She looked down at Tom with an expression of pained hope.

While Tom changed into dry clothes, Mom and Dad kept whispering and signaling to each other. The fight was over, and they were trying to discuss something behind his back. He batted at Mr. Mouse while he waited for them.

"Tom," said his Mom all of a sudden. "You don't have to go through with this. We could keep the appointment just to ask questions, or maybe we just won't go at all. What do you think?"

Tom looked down at the stuffed animal in his lap. The black plastic eyes stared back. He wrapped his arms around the mouse and squeezed, resisting the urge to kick and bite its ears. Like Mom hugs me, he thought, and he tried to remember what it was like to purr.

It almost felt right.

"Let's just go and do it," he said. He wanted his purr back, even if it had to be a laugh instead.

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Camille Allen LaGuire is a graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop and has sold stories to Highlights for Children and Cricket, as well as a number of small press publications. She works as a computer technician for Lansing Community College in Michigan.

Bing Burnham received a BA in Painting and Illustration from Carnegie-Mellon in 1932. She has recently returned to commercial art work again after a long hiatus.

Firecrackers

by Tim Miller

The man had time, now, and the inclination to tell his story. I studied him carefully. Harry Stevens had so many lines etched on his old face that it was impossible to tell where one wrinkle ended and another began. His thin hands were the same. Yet the man presented a strange appearance because his voice and movements were not those of an old man. Speaking in a firm tone and gesturing emphatically like a much younger man, his holographic image projected a contradiction which was difficult to get used to. As the story he had to tell unfolded, the contradictory image became less and less discernible and I became lost in his tale.

"I bought a pack of firecrackers when I was fifteen years old, eight firecrackers in the pack, and that is why I am still here today." The old man's gaze became distant and unfocused as he looked back over the years. "They were not normal firecrackers. Although I have since purchased similar firecrackers, crates and crates of them from every known source, I have never found any like that one package." Harry Stevens' eyes glittered fiercely at the memory, staring directly at me, and he continued his narrative. A robotic arm bearing a glass of some beverage entered the holographic space. Harry Stevens took the drink, holding it on the arm of his chair as the mechanical arm, unacknowledged, was silently withdrawn.

"I bought the firecrackers at a roadside fireworks stand outside of Doniphan, Missouri, one summer morning in early July. Halfway home I stopped because the chain slipped off the sprocket of my bicycle. After replacing the chain for what was probably the tenth time that morning, I lit one of the firecrackers. At first I thought it was a dud. Nothing happened. I was bending over to retrieve it, nothing is wasted when you are a boy — you can always peel them open and take the gunpowder out for later — when the area around the firecracker began to shimmer. It was like the shimmering of heat waves at a distance.

"I straightened up in alarm, thinking the firecracker was going to go off, and the shimmer turned for an instant into a marvelous silvery twinkling. The twinkling lasted for maybe one second, and when it was gone a little man stood where the firecracker had been. A little man no more than six inches tall wearing a red hat who said, 'What is your wish?'

"At that age I accepted this without too much difficulty. I still accept it, because it was real and true for me, though I was to learn that others would not. I was astonished, yes, but I accepted it. I have since learned that there are stranger things in the universe.

"Thinking for a few seconds, I told him I wanted a new bicycle. The little man regarded me solemnly for a moment, tipping his head quizzically to one side before saying, 'Be it so.' The twinkling and shimmering process repeated itself, in reverse this time, and the little man was gone. Where my old bicycle had stood was a brand new one, streamers hanging from the handlebars, a shiny horn, everything.

"I pedaled madly home, the remainder of the package of firecrackers safely in my pocket, bursting to tell my family and friends of this wondrous event. I was to be disappointed, however, for no one believed me. The bicycle was taken away. I was accused of theft and called a liar. It was an altogether horrifying experience, but I learned on that day that I would never be believed. I still had seven firecrackers left and I hid them away, telling no one."

Harry Stevens stopped speaking at this point, as though awaiting a response from me, and took a sip of his beverage. This was altogether unexpected. The Genetic Replication Committee of the 21st century had condemned this man more than a hundred years ago. The psychological profile on my desk confirmed his sanity unequivocally. The man looked sane for that matter, quite aged but sane as he sat in the armchair a few feet in front of my desk. That I was in New York and we were in actuality separated by more than 800 million miles meant nothing, for my holographic image appeared before him exactly as his appeared before me. Sanity and reality, I mused, took on slightly more relaxed parameters with the applications of advanced technology.

"I can certainly understand why you were not believed," I told him, not without warmth. There was something about this strange old man that appealed to me and I found myself liking him. His story was incredible but he told it well. "Am I the first you have told this to, since that time as a boy?"

"Yes," he replied, "for you see, it no longer matters whether I am believed or not. Shall I continue?"

"By all means," I told him. "I am very interested." He tilted his head and gave me a bemused, quizzical look, much like the little man described in his story, before continuing.

"I didn't want to use up the firecrackers all at once. At least I was smart enough at that age to know not to do that. But when I became eighteen I reached the age where the ache to own an automobile of my own became intolerable. The lesson learned with the bicycle was not lost on me, so I dili-

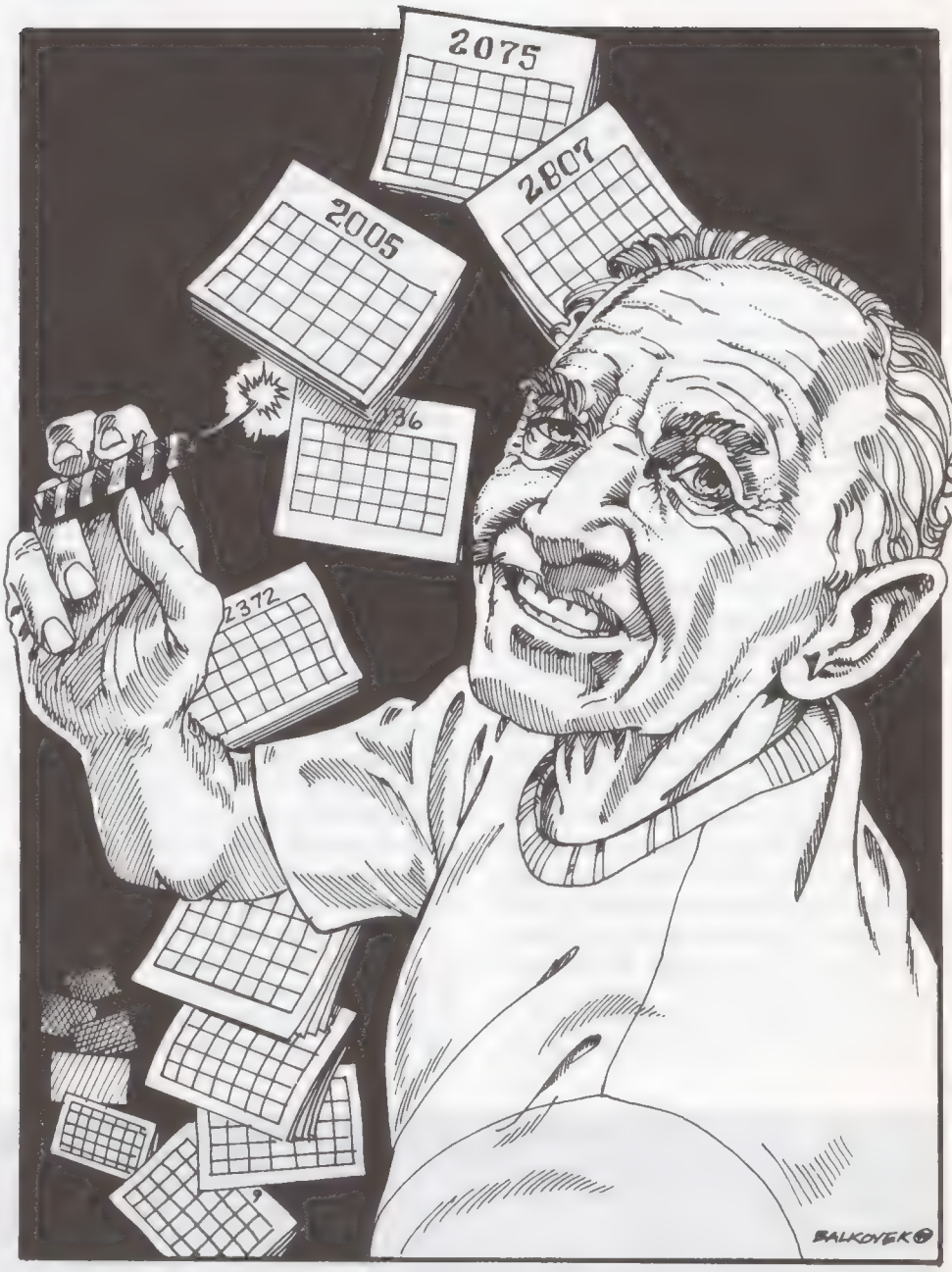
gently hoarded my savings through many years of part-time, after-school jobs, until I had nearly enough to purchase a car. Knowing nobody would believe me actually made it easier. A bus trip to a major city excused me from my family for two days, and after getting off the bus at the first rural stop and walking down a deserted country lane I was ready. I brought only one firecracker from my secret cache and hoped it would work. I lit the thing with great trepidation and tossed it on the road.

"It was the same as before. A shimmering like heat waves followed by a marvelous twinkling and the little man appeared exactly as he had before. 'What is your wish?' he asked solemnly. 'A car,' I replied without hesitation. 'A brand new, fully loaded red Corvette. Titled, registered, insured, all dated on this date.' The little man regarded me without expression for a moment before saying, 'Be it so.' With that he disappeared in a shimmer exactly like that which preceded his appearance. The shimmer expanded for a moment at the very end, and when it was over there was the car, gleaming in the afternoon sunlight in the middle of the dusty road.

"I was beside myself with excitement. You cannot imagine what power I felt knowing I still had plenty of firecrackers left. I later came to regret wasting a firecracker in that manner, but at the time it seemed just the thing to do. And that car got me around in high style all through my college years, I can tell you. It made me the type of person I came to be, I really believe that. It was to be many years before I used another firecracker and the money I saved on the car was secretly used a little bit at a time during the ensuing years."

Again he paused to refresh himself with his beverage. I could hear the faint hum of servo-mechanisms as he pushed a button in the arm of his chair, lowering the back and extending a foot rest. As he made himself comfortable and resumed his tale I considered him again. I found myself enjoying him immensely, and my reporter's instinct for a story was definitely aroused.

"I was twenty-five years old when I lit the third one. Finished with college, working as a musician in a small repertory theater, I knew I would never have any real money and, like everyone else, I wanted to be rich. I have never regretted the use of this firecracker. My prized automobile was old and in need of repair, I was existing in a dilapidated rental apartment barely making ends meet, and I was heartily sick of it. I lit the thing right in my apartment and it was as before. The strange and wonderful optics following 'Be it so' were no sooner over than the telephone rang and a man introduced himself as a stockbroker on the world exchange. The rest is history."



Artwork by James Balkovek

"It certainly is," I agreed. The file on my desk was largely concerned with financial statements regarding holdings so varied and extensive that they covered almost the entire solar system. That Harry Stevens owned them was little known, for this was not what he was remembered for, if he was remembered at all.

"I was thirty-two years old," he resumed, "when I succumbed to a desire for that which has compulsively driven people throughout the recorded history of humankind. I wanted to be recognized, I wanted to be famous."

The old man's voice trailed off at this point and he stared away again, lost in the memory. He was like this for almost a full minute, staring vacantly back through the dusty corridor of his years, small and helpless-looking now. I did not disturb him, lost in his reverie. This man, shrunken and alone now, was regarded by every known civilized world in existence as the greatest pianist of all time. It was for this

that he was remembered, though most people thought him long dead.

"I was a fool!" he snapped, rousing himself and addressing me directly once again. "Fame is a fleeting, transitory thing of little value. As soon as the ego is assuaged, fame's worth is gone and it becomes a bothersome thing, to be despised rather than sought. Were it not for the fact that my renown as a pianist enabled me to meet the girl who was to become my wife, this would have been a waste. I should have known better at that age."

"It could be argued that fame is a sort of immortality," I replied in an effort to calm him, "enabling one to be long remembered for that which was done best."

"There are other ways to immortality," he archly replied, with a look I would not have imagined possible on so ancient and wrinkled a visage. His eyes twinkled merrily as he said this and he finished his drink, holding the empty glass up for removal. Again only the arm of the personal robot which attended him was visible as it briefly entered the holographic aura, removed the glass from his hand, and as quickly disappeared. This was something I had never grown accustomed to, even after a lifetime of holography which was taken for granted much as primitive fax and computers once were. The robotic arm, which was not there to begin with, and the glass simply disappeared. It was a reminder that with the flip of a switch Harry Stevens would no longer be there either, in fact was not there now. All very disquieting after establishing intimate rapport.

"The fifth and sixth firecrackers were simultaneously utilized in the first half of the 21st century, following the great Earth war which threatened the solar system colonies. Those were the truly bad times, times which could have resulted in an extermination of humankind, and I feel proudest of those two choices. My wife and I were living in the Deimos resort, newly established after the miners had finished with their excavations, and often watched the sun rise over the surface of Mars, together, not knowing each time if it would be our last sunrise. The technology of war and the insidious viruses were truly a terrible thing at that time, and the telcom depicted global carnage Earthside and grotesque decimation of the colonies. Nightly, we shared the funereal gloom of all humanity as we watched the colonies fall one by one. I almost waited until it was too late, something which happens to me if I think about a thing for too long.

"My wife was asleep right beside me on the couch in front of our telcom unit when I lit them and she never woke up. When I asked the little man for galactic peace and an acutely instilled sense of ecological consciousness for all of humanity, he appeared for a moment to regard me with a look of approval before saying, 'Be it so.' Again, history substantiates this if it does not bear me out personally."

So fascinated by what he was telling me, it was a moment before I realized that he was no longer speaking. With a start, I considered his words. They were fantastic yet history, indeed, loaned a sense of credence to his almost unbelievable tale. Recorded history of the early 21st century invariably stated that the conflict was resolved by unanimous consent, either because of a feeling of abhorence for warfare which grew upon humankind after the decades of conflict, or a sudden realization of the extent of damage to the solar system. This never sounded right to me. I had never quite understood this official historical depiction, doubting the veracity of it more and more and I grew older and wiser and, frankly, Harry Stevens' version sounded a lot more reasonable if you accepted his basic premises. Which I didn't, of course. Not really.

"The following years were some of the best of my life. The tremendous effort put into reconstruction following the conflict, and the sense of universal brotherhood which resulted, almost made the terrible war worth the cost which had to be paid. My wife and

Artwork by James Balkovek

I had each other, my piano playing took me to every corner of the solar system, I was rich beyond my wildest imaginings, all of this contributed to those years. For twenty years my wife and I spent nearly every moment together and they were good years.

"Then my wife began to fail for pulmonary reasons, incurable at the time, and I used the seventh firecracker. She was seventy-one years old at the time and, if I knew then what it would have been like, I would not have used the firecracker but let her go peacefully. This time the little man had a look of sorrow on his tiny face as he said, 'Be it so.' I bought her twenty more years of life but they were wasted years, a sham to call them life at all, for she was not the same. Her vivacity was gone, her spark, and while she could slowly speak and walk, she retained the look of a corpse, silently suffering through those twenty extra years. That was a mistake. I should have let her go but I was greedy and I loved her and I wanted her still. I'm glad I only asked for twenty years, as it turned out."

Harry Stevens fell silent with these words, obviously too filled with emotion to continue. I wanted to reach out to him, as to a friend, but of course that would have been absurd for he wasn't there. I began to quietly go through the paperwork on my desk, as though I were not emotionally involved, in order to give the man time to regain his composure. When I looked up Harry Stevens surprised me when I saw that he was soundlessly laughing, in the way that old men do. His wrinkled face was positively cracked with mirth and I became annoyed.

"You don't have to look so solemn," he laughed. "All that was over a hundred years ago!"

My empathy dissipated and resolve hardened once again. Still, I could not help but like Harry Stevens, and soon was laughing with him. He was that kind of a guy. I punched a button on my desk, ordering a caffeine beverage, and when my rather shapely female android leaned over the desk to place the cup in front of me I watched my visitor's face. He didn't bat an eye. But then he wasn't my visitor, really, though he appeared in my office, any more than I was his visitor, seated in his. He scored a point there, though we weren't competing. Harry Stevens remained nonchalant at the intellectual dilemmas of technology, casually accepting it all though he had seen the advent of so much more of it in his long lifetime than I had; while I, who was born to this world, was perplexed and confused. He was quite a specimen.

"You must have guessed by now how I used the last firecracker," he said.

"I have an idea," I replied, attempting to drawl it out as dryly as I could. A sudden intuitive flash made me realize why I wanted to impress this man. It was because he was so phenomenal. I admired him now as well as liked him, he was worth impressing.

"Immortality," he said softly, reminiscing again. "When I lit the last firecracker and told the little man that I wanted to live forever, just as I was at that moment, the man looked positively amused when he said, 'Be it so,' and twinkled out of my life forever. It didn't take long to find out what was so funny."

"The genetic replication decree," I prompted.

"Exactly," he responded. "Within ten years of lighting the last firecracker I was indicted by the World Court for genetic replication immortality experimentation, even though there was no proof. Though the solar system was undergoing a renaissance of sorts following the great war, the old ways were deemed best, as you know, and the genetic search for immortality was banned. In light of my verifiable years, I was accused. After ten years of litigation, which strengthened the case against me, of course, because I didn't age, years of litigation which strained even wealth such as mine, I was sentenced to death here at the galactic penal colony on Saturn."

The old man's voice trailed off at this point as he stared pensively into his memory. All of this was in the records before me as well, in fact the reason we were sharing an expensive holographic link was the issue of his death. It was not widely known that two formal attempts to put this man to death, meticulously engineered attempts involving projected dismemberment with explosives and the application of gigawatts of electricity, had both failed completely. A hurried and secret meeting of the World Court had changed his sentence to life imprisonment upon discovering that he was truly immortal.

"Thus the amused twinkle in the little man's eye," Harry murmured quietly to himself. "To be condemned to serve a sentence of life in prison after having achieved immortality."

"And during all those years in the World Court you never told them what you've just told me?" I was truly curious.

"Would you have told it?" he responded.

"I guess not," I replied. I was profoundly moved by this, by the man Harry Stevens himself. I glanced down at his record on my desk and when I looked up the man was laughing again, truly convulsed with laughter this time.

"You don't get it, do you?" he gasped, attempting to control his laughter and catch his breath. "You haven't thought it through."

I just stared at him this time, unable to speak. He was right. I didn't get it.

"Don't you see?" he controlled himself enough to explain. "It doesn't matter. It took me many years to realize it, but fame, riches, the World Court, imprisonment, none of it matters in the least. I will outlast you all. I am immortal." Harry Stevens began to laugh again, an edge of hysteria creeping into his voice. "When the stars blink out one by one and the hands of time wind down, when the planets turn to dust and are swept away by the winds of the cosmos, I will still be alive."

The hysteria took over in the old man. Wracked with emotion he began to sob. "Alone, for eternity."

At this exact moment a searing image of Harry Stevens was burned into my mind, a picture which I have carried with me for years. It is an image of a little, naked old man floating in an incomprehensible vastness. A frightening vastness, silent, unmoving, unending — with Harry Stevens turning slowly all alone.

This is how the holographic transmission ended. I put his file away and never looked at it again but I think about him still. Unlike the rest of us, assured of at least a termination if not a change, Harry Stevens will never realize his destiny.

*

Tim Miller has lived a varied and colorful life, from oil rigs in Wyoming, to shrimp boats in the Gulf of Mexico, to riding freight trains with hoboes. He finds his grandest adventures inside his own head, and this is the first of those he has had published.

James Balkovek heads Black Eagle Productions, a graphic arts studio in Quincy, California.

An Interview with Ray Nelson

by Darrell Schweitzer

Darrell Schweitzer: Let us start at a frivolous point and work our way in to your serious literary accomplishments. I understand you invented the propeller beanie and popularized its use in fandom. Could you tell us something about that?

Ray Nelson: In the summer of 1947, I was holding a regional science fiction convention in my front room, and it culminated with myself and some Michigan fans dressing up in some improvised costumes to take joke photographs, simulating the covers of science fiction magazines. The headgear which I designed for the space hero was the first propeller beanie. It was made out of pieces of plastic, bit of coathanger wire, some beads, a propeller from a model airplane, and staples to hold it all together. After we took these joke photographs, George Young, a fan from Detroit, took the propeller beanie with him to Detroit and very shortly thereafter wore it to a world convention, which I think was in Toronto. It was an enormous hit, and for about a year many fans engaged in making other kinds of propeller beanies and other kinds of beanies with things attached to them. I drew hundreds and hundreds of cartoons for fanzines portraying science fiction fans wearing propeller beanies. Other fans picked up the propeller beanie symbol, because it was a very handy way of designating fans, and telling them apart from what we call "mundanes". Redd Boggs was one of those who drew propeller beanies on fans. Bill Rotsler was another. Actually, the list is too long to run down. In Britain, Arthur Thompson — "ATom" — picked it up immediately.

It spread with incredible rapidity all over the world, and some time around 1949 or 1950, a guy in Los Angeles named Bruce Sedley, who had a television show with hand-puppets, picked up the idea and made a puppet of Beanie, and another, a sock-puppet, for Cecil the Seasick Sea Serpent. That show ran for only a few months before it was picked up by a Disney cartoonist named Bob Clampett, who put it together as a syndicated, animated cartoon series, which popularized Beanie and Cecil to the world. By that time, science fiction fans had co-opted the propeller beanie to themselves. I don't think that, by now, anyone could undo the identification of the propeller beanie with science fiction fans.

This makes you the fannish equivalent of the inventor of the Smile Face. Likewise, you never made any money off it.

No, I've never made any money off it, but there's one company in Berkeley, called Interstellar Propeller, which is run by some friends of mine who make a propeller beanie exactly the way I designed it, including the little beads that make the propeller swing freely. They give me a free copy of every new propeller beanie design that they make, and they've made many variations down through the years, each of which I add to my voluminous collection.

It was more than ten years after that before you made your debut as a professional writer. What were you doing in the meantime?

I don't know whether to give you the **ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA** or the *Reader's Digest* version of that, but I guess it will be the *Reader's Digest* version. I just went from job to job, and eventually I ended up in Paris, France, and there I wrote "Turn Off the Sky", which turned out to be my first published science fiction story. It was actually written to be read aloud at a series of poetry readings. I was involved with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs and the other poets and writers who later became known as "the Beat Generation", but who regarded themselves at that time as the San Francisco Renaissance. There were weekly poetry readings and short-story readings at a bookstore there [in Paris], called the Mistrail Bookstore, an English-language bookstore.

I had nothing to read, so I began writing my first extended story. That eventually coagulated into "Turn Off the Sky", which Forry Ackerman attempted to sell for about three years, and then gave up on. But while he was trying, it went through the hands of Avram Davidson, who was a sub-editor at *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. When he became the actual editor, he sent out word along the grapevine that he wanted to see that story, which he had liked and which his superior hadn't liked.

When I heard that, I was about to go to a job interview as a commercial artist, but instead of going to my job interview, I jumped into my car and I drove to Venice [California] and staked out Avram Davidson's house. He was gone when I arrived, but he turned up in the early hours of the morning, tottering home after a wild party, and I leaped from my car and thrust the manuscript into his hands. I believe that he was so relieved that I didn't mug him that he purchased this, my first published work in the science-fiction field. That is the very same story that recently Isaac Asimov anthologized and called "probably the best first story in the history of

science fiction."

It's also been called the first New Wave story.

That's true. But that's the end of that question.

It is meaningful to say it was the first New Wave story, or was this label just put on it in retrospect?

I think it's pretty meaningful, because it was written pretty strongly under the influence of William Burroughs. And at that point, if I remember correctly, William Burroughs hadn't been published at all. His first story was called JUNKIE, and it was published as half of an Ace Double under a pen-name. But at that time he was nevertheless influencing me. His influence gave "Turn Off the Sky" a surrealistic cast, and the bohemian characters who inhabit it were not at all characteristic of the science fiction of the time. In fact they were even less characteristic when it was written. There was, as I say, a considerable gap between the writing and publication. So even when it was published, the world of literature hadn't exactly caught up, because the person who was the chief influence on me when I wrote had not yet himself been published.

Q: This must have been the influence of Burroughs and the poetry readings coalescing with the influence of genre science fiction. Otherwise I would imagine you would have ended up in literary magazines and gone the same route as Burroughs.

Nelson: I asked William Burroughs one time who was the greatest influence on him, and he said, "The other Burroughs", by whom he meant Edgar Rice. One thing that I've noticed is that people tend to not notice the fact that many of William Burroughs's stories are science fiction pure and simple, except a little dirty. They're intended to be that way, because all of the Beat people were terrific fans. It shows in their work, especially in Jack Kerouac's Doctor Sax, which tells about his being influenced by a character he calls "Dr. Sax", but it's transparently a sort of combination of The Spider, The Shadow, and a number of other characters from the pulps of the '30s and '40s.

Were you still active in science fiction fandom at this time?

Yes, I was. I was being published fairly frequently in British fanzines, and I began to publish a fanzine in French as soon as I was capable of writing reasonably coherent French, which I learned when I got to France. The fanzine was called *Le Marche Aux Puces Fantastique*, which means Fantastic Flea Market. Most of my writing in that period was in the French language. There was still science fiction and fannish writing, especially during the period when I stayed with a French fan by the name of Jean Linard in a small town called Vesoul. There he helped me publish my French-language fanzine and introduced me to a lot of members of French fandom, which at that time was virtually identical to a philosophical movement called the College of Pataphysics. But I wasn't publishing much in the English language during the period when I was in Europe.

What years were those?

Let's see, it would be from 1954 to early 1960.

Then "Turn Off the Sky" was published in 1963. Were you part of the science fiction scene or part of the Beat scene when you started publishing in English?

When I returned to the United States, I was more in the Beat scene than I was in the science fiction scene. But I had a lot of friends in fandom who I recontacted when I got back to San Francisco. But, really, that's not an easy question, because in my mind there is not a clear distinction between the Beat scene and the science fiction scene. For example, we had Philip Dick, who contributed to little literary reviews, just like me, and went to poetry readings and consorted with literary figures. You probably don't know because it isn't emphasized in the various biographies, but Anne Dick, one of Phil's wives, had as her previous husband the editor of *Neurotica*, which was the first magazine to publish Allen Ginsberg. So there is a very strong connection and an overlap in personnel between the Beat movement and the fan movement. There are some people who *aren't* famous — it would be useless to try to remember their names — who would be very hard put to tell you which of the two movements they were in. There was a fellow by the name of J.G. Newkom, for example, who lived with Phil in Oakland for a while. I was the one who introduced the two of them to one another, and I knew J.G. Newkom primarily before I went to Paris as a fellow member of the San Francisco Renaissance, which was later dubbed "Beatniks" by Herb Caen, the San Francisco newspaper columnist.

How long had you known Phil Dick, and on what basis?

Now that's a curious thing, because I knew Phil slightly when I was in grade school, at Hilltop in Berkeley. He was in a different grade level than I was, and I didn't know him well, but when I met him again later, after returning from Europe, at first I didn't like him at all. I met him at a party and we ignored each other royally, but after we met each other several more times, we got into non-stop, improvisational stand-up comedy routines. It turned out that in spite of my initial negative reaction to him, we were immensely compatible. I think we were each other's best friends during the period when he was breaking up with Anne and moving to Oakland, during the period when he was living with Grania Davis. That was before he went to Canada, and after he left Point Reyes.

How did you come to collaborate with him on THE GANYMEDE TAKEOVER?

That was the outgrowth of a party at Phil's house, which was attended by Poul and Karen Anderson, Grania Davis,

Photo: Darrell Schweitzer

and J.G. Newkom. I believe Marion Zimmer Bradley was there. We all sat around Phil's dining-room table making up a story together. It was on a round-robin basis. One person would give a few sentences or a paragraph, then the next one would tell it. After we had finished doing this thing and laughing a whole lot, I went home and wrote a plot outline based on the story that we had all done together.

I showed it to Phil and Phil said, "Well, we can write this." So he wrote a first chapter based on that and submitted it to his agent, Scott Meredith — I guess it was Russ Galen, one of Meredith's personnel, who actually handled the deal. Scott Meredith was against the whole thing, but we did it anyway. The way we did it was that we worked out this outline I had written from the improvisation more elaborately, and then we wrote alternate chapters. We would meet once a week and hand each other the chapters, and each of us would edit the other's chapter.

We ended up with a book that was unpublishably long. So Phil cut it somewhat and resubmitted it to Scott Meredith, who sent it out once or twice and then said he didn't think he would ever sell it. So Phil, believing Scott's dictum that we would never sell it, took a portion of it and sold it as a magazine story. Then after it had been sold as a magazine story, Scott Meredith *did* manage to sell it to Ace Books. But Ace Books didn't want to publish it with that portion that Phil had already sold to the magazine. The magazine was one of those temporary pulps that flourished in that period. The story was called "The Little Black Box". [Published in *Worlds of Tomorrow*, August 1964, bylined by Philip K. Dick alone. — D.S.] He'd altered it some to make it not necessarily part of a book. The upshot was that I had to rewrite the center of the book to avoid duplicating the material that was in the original version. Then, with this new center, it appeared as an Ace paperback. It's been in print somewhere another in the world ever since. The British and American versions have for many years alternated. When it was in print in Britain, it was not in print in the United States and vice-versa. Italian and French versions are still in print. I get regular royalties from them.

Was this the first novel that you had written?

This was the first novel of mine that I got published. But before that I wrote an autobiographical novel, which has never been published and it's probably just as well. It's not very good. It was my learning book.

THE GANYMEDE TAKEOVER was the first complete novel I had ever finished. I did novelettes before then, and short fiction. I did it along with Phil in a spirit of hilarious fun. It's doubtful if I would have been able to finish a novel at all, if I hadn't been able to finish it in that fun spirit along with Phil.

*Is this what provided the impetus to go on and write **BLAKE'S PROGRESS** and the other books which clearly established you as an independent science-fiction novelist?*

BLAKE'S PROGRESS came about because Adrienne Martine-Barnes was trying to establish herself as a literary agent. She had an agency which she called the Owl Agency. She and I were going to be literary agents together. At that point I didn't have any idea that I was going to write. I was going to agent other people's writings. But she got word that Harlequin Books was going to start up a series of science-fiction books, which eventually became the Laser Books series, and she didn't tell me about it for weeks. When I found out about it, she hadn't managed to get together any manuscripts at all to send in. So I telephoned Roger Elwood, and I didn't get through to him, but I said that I wanted to talk to him about that, and he phoned me later on. He said that he was looking for some books for the science-fiction series, and did I have any ideas? Between the time that he said, "Do you have any ideas?" and the time I began speaking, the idea of **BLAKE'S PROGRESS** came in almost complete form into my head. I had been a tremendous William Blake fan for at least ten years. Then I wrote a first chapter and synopsis, sent it to Roger, and he sent an enthusiastic acceptance, and I wrote it with almost no revision, and he published it with hardly any editing at all.

*It was published some years later as **TIMEQUEST**. What is the difference between the two texts?*

After **BLAKE'S PROGRESS** was published, a lot of Blakean scholars and Blake fans wrote letters to me, and some of them could point out minor blunders in my factual material on William Blake, and others were bringing up all kinds of interesting angles that I hadn't even considered before, the most important of which was the fact that William Blake knew Mary Wolstonecraft, the mother of Mary Shelley, the creator of Frankenstein. Mary Wollstonecraft is now thought of as being the mother of feminism, because she wrote a book called **A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN**, which is still available in women's bookstores. And, as I delved into the relationship between Mary Wollstonecraft and William Blake, it became clear to me that they had an affair. And another thing that became clear to me as I was delving was that there were two different art styles that William Blake used, and one of them seems to me to be that of his wife, Kate. When William Blake died, he had some unfulfilled contracts for artwork, and Kate finished them. The artwork that she produced when she was finishing these contracts was clearly the fluid, sort of Picassoesque style, that was contrasted with William Blake's own style, which was quite stiff and dependent on copying, detail-for-detail, other people's paintings.

I just had to do it over to get in all this new thinking and new way of looking at William Blake which I had gotten from the Blakean scholars who wrote letters to me, and from the things I had thought about after the book was in print.

It's one of two books that I actually rewrote *after* they had been published. In my mind a book is never complete. I read them over again, and I always see where I can do more with them. So the temptation is very great for me to just write the same books over and over. But so far I've usually resisted that temptation.

*One last note on **BLAKE'S PROGRESS** — how did you find Roger Elwood to work with, as an editor?*

Other people have told all kinds of awful stories, but from the standpoint of a working relationship, he was the best editor I ever had, because he had this marvelous capacity for buying everything I wrote without changing it. He was the *only* editor who has ever done that for me. Avram Davidson made changes that I really hated in "Turn Off the Sky". Harlan Ellison made changes in "Time Travel for Pedestrians". But beyond changing the punctuation a little bit, Roger never changed anything that I wrote, so he was an ideal editor from my standpoint.

*For all you saw a need to revise it, the original version of **BLAKE'S PROGRESS** was certainly successful, complete with a few near-misses from various awards. But it doesn't seem to have gotten much attention when reissued as **TIMEQUEST**. Why is*

this?

Well, Laser Books was a disaster from a public relations standpoint, because of statements made by Roger and by other editors to the effect that it was going to be for men what Harlequin Romances were for women. This so enraged the entire body of fandom, and especially of critical fandom, that they never viewed the line of Laser Books in anything remotely resembling an objective frame of mind. But Laser Books is greatly underestimated. People forget that, for example, K.W. Jeter was discovered by Roger Elwood. Jerry Pournelle had a book in the Laser series which was later republished. Tim Powers was discovered by Roger Elwood. Tim Powers and K.W. Jeter are, I would say, avant-garde science fiction writers, unusual, off-the-wall types of science fiction writers. Roger, if he had done nothing else but discover these two writers, would have performed an enormous service to the science fiction community.

Your other major case of a book being rewritten after it's published is THE REVOLT OF THE UNEMPLOYABLES, which became THE PROMETHEUS MAN, which is twice as long as the original. How did that happen?

That again was me becoming dissatisfied with a book that was already published, and what I was dissatisfied with was that there are two central characters in it, a husband and a wife, and in the original version, the wife didn't get much play. In **THE PROMETHEUS MAN** she got equal billing, and I followed her when she was away from her husband. Since there were now two plot threads instead of one, that made the book twice as long as it had been before.

Don't I remember this one also as a novelette in Fantastic *about 1974?*

You're probably thinking of an excerpt from the first novel. But the first version was also published as book by a small press. This first book version formed the basis for the second.

It then won an award —

It won the special citation of the Philip K. Dick Award for best paperback novel that year.

But then you don't seem to have published anything for a while. What happened after that?

One thing that keeps happening is that I get more involved in art than I do in writing, but I have written three novels in the past few years, which are out to market, one might say. But they didn't find a publisher immediately, so I swung a large portion of my amoebic-talented brain to the graphic arts and signed on to a magazine called *The American Window Cleaner*, on which I am the staff artist. I do the covers and interiors and advertising layouts. That sucks up an enormous amount of my creative energy. But I'm still writing. I'm just not getting published.

Surely the creative energy involved in doing Window Cleaner *covers is very different from that involved in writing a novel.*

In my mind, it's not that much different, because the first art form I worked in was the comic book. When I was still a kid, in grade school, I was drawing comic books on an amateur basis. A comic book is something that is both a story and a drawing. To me, when I write a book, I see the things that are happening, in my head, as if they were visual images as well as words. This turned out to be a great blessing when I had an opportunity to write a movie script for Universal Pictures. I was supposed to have the assistance of a real pro screenwriter when I did that, but he was on strike at the moment, so I found myself compelled to write a script without really knowing what I was doing, along with the director, his girlfriend, and Roddy the wrestler. I think it turned out real well, probably better than if I'd had the assistance of somebody who had known what he was doing.

What film was this?

The movie came out in 1988, *THEY LIVE* from Universal Pictures, with Roddy Piper as the star and John Carpenter as the director, a script by Frank Armitage. Of course Armitage is a totally imaginary person.

About this time you also wrote one mystery novel, DOGHEADED DEATH.

DOGHEADED DEATH is a historical mystery, set in the First Century, A.D. That was published by a small press, Strawberry Hill Press. That had been written maybe two or three years before it was actually published. I never really tried very hard to market it. But one day I was sitting in the bookstore — I had a bookstore at that time — and the editor of Strawberry Hill Press came in and was talking about us carrying books that he was publishing, and it came out in the conversation that I was writing books also. He said, "Well, can I see something?" It just happened that I had two books in the store in manuscript boxes at the time, which I handed to him across the counter, and he picked **DOGHEADED DEATH** to be published.

What are you working on now?

Right at this exact moment I'm not working on anything at all.

But something will surely happen soon.

But who knows what? Most writers say, "I have to write every day or I'll go crazy," or "I'm driven by the Muse" to write. I'm not driven by the Muse to write. I can draw, and that satisfies me. Or I can work in a band. I'm not a very good musician, but I'm a good backing musician on the guitar. And that satisfies me. I have to do something or other, but it doesn't necessarily have to be writing. So, if one of my books sold, that would immensely influence me in the direction of writing another one. But since there are three books which are finished but unsold, then my tendency is, as I say, to push where it gives. Those parts of my life where I seem to be succeeding are the parts that I tend to turn my energies toward.

End of interview, recorded in San Francisco, September 1993. By way of a postscript, after reading this, I asked Ray to expand a little more on his friendship with Philip K. Dick, and he sent the following, which is reproduced verbatim:

...So now you ask me, "What sort of guy was Philip R. Dick?"

Philip K. Dick was the sort of person to whom happen the kinds of things that happen to me.

I just got a request from an editor to write something about what kind of guy Philip K. Dick was, but he made it plain he would be paying for it only in copies of the magazine or book or whatever it was. I might have done it even though the money wasn't right, except for one thing, which is that this editor started right in asking about the connection between Phil and L. Ron Hubbard, and about the so-called "Hubbard's Gold". Now starting a week after Hubbard's death, all sorts of people have been pulling all sorts of stunts to get me to tell them what I know about a stash of money Hubbard is supposed to have socked away in case he wanted to fake his death and begin life anew elsewhere. Someone somehow

even managed to get a look at my letters from Hubbard (we were long-time pen-pals) in my bank safe-deposit box, stupidly putting them back out of chronological order. You can bet I don't have those letters in the safe-deposit box anymore, and I don't think I'll put it in print where I do have them, either.

One of the people who wanted to know what Philip K. Dick was like was a reporter from *The New York Times Book Review* whom *The New York Times Book Review*, when phoned, had never heard of. He told me I might know something about Phil and Ron that I didn't know I knew.

I did know that while Phil was in Canada, Ron drove up the coast to see him. Phil had just been told by agents of certain gangsters Phil had been dealing with that he, Phil, would have to come up with at least a down payment on something close to a million bucks they claimed he owed them for drugs he claimed had been stolen when his safe in Marin County had been blown. If he didn't they would do bad things not only to him, but to those he held dear.

At his wit's end, Phil went to a drug rehabilitation center he was currently patronizing and there someone said, "You have a visitor, Phil."

Before he could flee, Phil was hailed by a portly old gentleman, shabbily dressed, who looked vaguely familiar. They fell into conversation and the stranger seemed to know every detail of Phil's career. Phil confided his predicament and, about dawn, the stranger said maybe something could be done about it.

The stranger wrote a check for twenty-five thousand dollars to Phil and signed it L. Ron Hubbard, then left.

Phil naturally thought this was some kind of hoax, but just for the hell of it took the check to the bank.

There was some delay, but the check then cleared and Phil knew he had actually been talking to the founder of that most science-fictional of religions, Scientology.

The two began corresponding, sometimes sending me xerox copies of their letters, and finally Ron told Phil, "Come to Hollywood and I'll see that some of your stories are at least optioned for films."

He did and they were.

BLADE RUNNER and *TOTAL RECALL.*

Ron also corresponded with Robert Heinlein, having gotten Bob's address from me. (Bob and I had been working together setting up a blood bank for the Science Fiction Writers of America.)

At one point he proposed to Phil and Bob and me that we four should fake our deaths and go off somewhere to spend his money, of which he claimed to have millions, maybe billions, which nobody could ever trace. The plan was that we would use a certain voodoo drug he knew of to simulate death, then his inner circle followers from Scientology would substitute the bodies of vagrants for ours and these bodies would be cremated before anyone but our personal and well-bribed physicians could see them.

His wealth, he said, was hidden in plain sight where anyone could see it but only someone like us could recognize it. And he'd hidden clues about it in his ten-book series, Mission Earth.

I thought he was kidding at the time, but now I'm not too sure.

Ron, Bob, and Phil all died suddenly and mysteriously, Ron the most mysteriously of all, since according to someone in Scientology I trust, Ron correctly predicted the date of his own death.

Ron, Bob, and Phil were all cremated before anyone but their personal physicians could see their bodies.

According to a newspaper reporter on the *Oakland Tribune*, a friend of mine, witnesses who knew Phil personally saw him after his supposed death, not as a dream or a spirit, but in the all-too-solid flesh.

So, you ask what kind of a guy Phil was. He was the kind of guy who would go for that kind of deal.

Yours, in a Philip K. Dick universe,
Ray Nelson ❄

The Results of the Cauldron

Stories:

- 1st Place: **"First Maxim" by Steven Piziks**
- 2nd Place: **"The Price of Beauty" by Julie Newcomb**
- 3rd Place: **"No Greater Love" by Lisa Deason**

Artwork:

- 1st Place: **Rob Alexander for "No Greater Love"**
- 2nd Place: **David Cherry for the cover for "Ice Princess"**
- 3rd Place: **Gail Butler for "The Price of Beauty"**

Congratulations to all the winners! To vote for your favorites in *this* issue, use the ballot on page 64. Your interest and enthusiasm mean a lot to us at *FANTASY* Magazine.

One Summer

BY MICHAEL JOHNSON

One summer, Portia discovered a way of flight that was as simple as Shaker furniture.

By clutching the corners of a crisp, white pillowslip with her pink hands, and holding her arms out with the cloth taut against her chest, she could rise up with the slightest of breezes. The breeze pushed the fabric against her light frame as though she were a diamond kite made of thin dowels and newspaper, with the nascent buds of her breasts pressing outward through the sheet, and up she would go. Tiltingly at first, then gaining altitude, ten feet, fifteen feet, thirty feet, until the breeze worked her out of the maze of salt box houses, maples and white picket fences, and then she was free.

It was so simple, she couldn't believe she was the only one who had discovered it.

"Do this," she told Sally, who her mother had let sleep over one Friday night. Portia slid open the window. The big frame rumbled loudly, but she was relieved to hear her younger brother Robert still snoring in the next room. She edged onto the new paint of the sill with her bare feet dangling, and taking the pillowslip draped over her shoulder, she stretched it out.

"What if we fall?" Sally asked. It was a long way down. Portia's mother ran an antique shop on the first floor of the big house; Portia and Robert slept on the third floor, one floor above their parents.

"We won't," Portia replied. She slid off the sill with a rustle and dropped.

For a moment, she felt a knot gather in her throat and tighten. But then the wind caught the pillowslip, and she stopped falling and began to rise. The lower corners of the pillowslip fluttered and tickled her legs.

"Come on!" she whispered. Sally clambered reluctantly on the sill, stretched her pillowslip, and dropped. In a moment, she, too, rose up.

Portia showed Sally how to turn the pillowslip to rise and fall and to guide herself. Soon both of them had risen above the slate shingles of the house. Chimney stacks and the crowns of maples and tamaracks became a playground for hide-and-seek in the June moonlight.

They played until they couldn't hold their arms out straight any longer and went to bed exhausted.

"Keep this a secret," Portia commanded. It was understood between Portia and her friends that keeping things secrets applied mostly to boys. And especially to brothers.

In a matter of days, Portia's other friends were airborne. Every night the sky was filled with the crisp fluttering of pillowslips, the patterns of colorful cartoon characters, and the delighted wiggling of pink feet. Flying with her friends, Portia felt the same woozy delight in her tummy that she got from eating a huge slice of hot rhubarb pie.

One night, Robert had trouble sleeping. Something behind the wall thumped and squeaked. The room next door was Portia's, and Robert thought she was up playing. But when he got out of bed to tell her to stop it, she wasn't in her room and her dolls were still in their neat stacks of shoeboxes. The window, however, was wide open with the screen pushed up.

Portia's pillow lay on the maple floor, a few curls of goose down twisting in the warm breeze from the window. It was missing its pillowslip.

He leaned out the window. The breeze tossed black shapes of the trees in the yard; above them, the sky was the purple gauze of a midsummer night, leaking the light of stars. Far above the treetops, beyond the tall white spire of the church in the center of town, he saw what seemed to be scraps of white cloth blown aloft. With amazement, he realized it was Portia and her friends.

But now jealousy nibbled at wonder. He had always wanted to fly — like his hero Johnny Atom did, flying off to save the day with a fanfare. He wanted to go with them. But the girls were so far away he didn't try calling to them. Instead, he waited and waited until he fell asleep with his head on his sister's pillow.

As Portia said good-bye to her friends, early dawn was seeping into the sky, and the robins were uttering their first rusty notes of waking. She swooped down between the trees to her window, eased onto the ledge and swung her feet over the sill. When she saw Robert curled up on the floor, she was frightened of how much he might have seen.

She nudged the pillow with one foot. "Go to your own room," she whispered.

Robert blinked sleepily. "I saw you flying."

If the secret got out, Portia thought, the boys would never stop pestering

Artwork by Allison Hershey

them. She and her friends were at that age when boys were sworn enemies. "You did not. Go to bed."

"But I saw you —"

"You were dreaming."

"You flew with that." He pointed to the evidence in Portia's hands.

She looked at the pillowslip and thought quickly. "You pulled it off. You were sleepwalking."

Robert staggered to his feet. "You're my sister. You're supposed to share. I want to fly, too."

"If you ever tell anyone, anyone," Portia hissed, "we will take you and drop you from a million miles up!"

Her brother stood there, numb. He nodded, a glimmer of wetness appearing around his eyes. He left, and Portia flopped back into her bed, all her exhilaration curdled to anxiety.

If he told, she really would drop him from a million miles up.

Robert wasn't about to tell anyone. Portia often followed through on her threats, despite the punishment she received as a result. Once, her father had her scrub every window sash in the house with fine steel wool so he could refinish them; there were many windows, and their father was a perfectionist.

He lay in bed, waiting for the alarm clock — it was in the shape of Johnny Atom, whose special visor flickered the time of day continuously on the ceiling overhead — and thinking. If Portia could do it, so could he. It looked so easy! He had only seen her from a distance, but all she had used was her pillowslip.

He tugged off his own. It was crisp, changed every Monday by his mother. He swung his legs out from under the single bedsheet and put on his slippers. Each bright, dinosaur-green slipper had a little ribbon stamped with his name sewn in; his mother had sewn these ribbons in all his clothes.

As he raised up the window screen, it screeched and made his teeth ache.

He didn't like what he saw. It made him dizzy to look down. How could he possibly stand flying? He didn't even like climbing trees. But he loved flying in jets; when his family flew to Minnesota last summer, they had to peel him off the window, his Mom said.

He eased one leg out the window, and then the other, and perched. The steel edge of the storm window frame cut into his bottom. As he fought to maintain his balance on that knife-edge, he stretched out his arms. The pillowslip rippled as his arms trembled. Then he made the mistake of looking down, and he slipped.

He bottled up his scream. His arms went rigid as he steeled himself for the impact. The air whistled horribly in his ears.

Thanks to the juniper hedge under his window, Robert didn't break anything. He was, however, knocked as full of bruises and small punctures as a windfall apple.

Fearing being dropped from a much greater height, he lied and told his parents he had leaned out too far while looking at the stars. He could not explain the pillowslip they had found clutched in his hands when they pulled him from the hedge.

His sister, on the other hand, knew exactly what he had been up to. She repeated her warning and told him never to fly again.

But he dreamed of flying like Johnny Atom.

Portia was beat when she got off the bus from band practice.

She regretted ever signing up for band; she didn't realize she would have to practice this hard when school wasn't even in session for a silly Fourth of July parade. It was all she could do to drag her clarinet case into the house and drop it beside the hall tree and the other antiques. It was against house rules for any of the family to leave personal things on the first floor; though the downstairs was furnished like a normal house, it was with antiques only. But Portia just couldn't make it. She curled up onto the horsehair divan in the front hallway and fell asleep.

The next thing she knew, her mother was shaking her. "Portia! Portia! Are you feeling all right?"

Portia opened her eyes. "I'm tired."

Her mother wrinkled her forehead. "I'm worried about you. You've been so sleepy lately. Do you have a temperature?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm just tired."

"I'm taking you to the doctor. I don't think you're sleeping right."

The doctor couldn't find anything wrong, but suggested that Portia's mother keep an eye on her. It could be some sleep irregularity, he said, such as apnea or leg-twitching or even sleepwalking. Whatever it was, it seemed to be going around; other mothers had been bringing in daughters with similar symptoms.

"If it's sleepwalking," Portia's mother said, distressed at the possibility of having two children who were sleepwalkers, "then I don't want you falling out the window like Robert. We're locking your window shut."

Her father didn't just lock the window, but put in a vertical bar of wood between the top of the lowered, inner sash and the lintel. Then he screwed it into place with big lag screws so a sleepwalking Portia couldn't remove it easily. He did the same with Robert's window.

Portia used the bathroom window after that.

It couldn't be that hard, Robert thought. *Portia isn't that smart. If she can figure it out, so can I.*

He stared a long time out his window, waiting for Portia to leave. Around midnight he saw her zip past his window. Then he got up, tucked his toes into his slippers, pulled off his pillowslip and went to the bathroom. He sat on the window ledge and raised up the screen. A breeze snaked in from under the door and out the window. This time, he sat back a little farther so that if he slipped, he'd fall back into the room.

Suddenly, Portia swooped up before him, scowling like a witch. Startled, he toppled over backward, catching himself just in time.

"I told you not to try this!" she said.

"Stop spying on me," Robert muttered. But he kept his eyes on her hands, watching how she held the pillowslip.

"You can't fly, anyway. Only girls can fly. Now, go back to sleep before I drag you out and drop you!" A couple of her girlfriends — Sally was there — grinned at him wickedly, floating in the air behind her.

Robert went back to his room and lay down. Portia flew by his window, still scowling, and then vanished; one by one the other girls swung by, too, mouthing threats through the thick, double-pane glass of the locked window.

He heeded them, but he also heeded how they held the sleek fabric close to their breasts and twisted their hands to rein in the wind.

He waited a few nights before trying again. He had to.

Portia and her friends came by his

window each night to spy on him. Each time, he pretended he was asleep, watching the white fluttering of their pillowslips through the scrim of his eyelashes as he daydreamed of flying high.

But after a couple of nights, Portia stopped making her checks. Robert waited two more nights to make absolutely sure she had stopped, and then he decided it was time.

He had rehearsed the movements of his arms and hands over and over in his dreams. When he slipped off the window ledge, he knew he could do it.

But he dropped like a rock. He twisted his wrists furiously, hoping to hit the right angle. He kicked with his dinosaur-green slippers as if it might help.

The piney scent of the hedge below blossomed up to meet him. Suddenly, he looped up like a poorly trimmed paper airplane and cleared the hedge. He was flying! The thrill of danger caught in his throat like a bug.

In the next few minutes, he figured out just how taut to hold the pillowslip and just how to flex his wrists — sort of. Flying was a lot harder than it looked.

Yet it was everything he had dreamed about. He could almost hear the brassy blare of cornets! The wind pushed Robert up and over the tossing, dark trees, and as he looked down and soared higher, the narrow town streets, faintly luminescent with starlight, shrank to a net of fine threads. Houses spotted the net, dewdrops on a spider web.

But in the distance, past the expanse of apple orchards outside of town, he could see many tiny flutterings, like a line of laundry snapped loose by the wind. He hurried back to his house before Portia could spot him.

When Robert fell asleep in front of the TV one afternoon instead of helping out with dusting and waxing the antiques, Portia knew immediately. The only thing that could drop Robert into a nap in the middle of the day was playing all night. But before their mother caught on, she decided to put a stop to it. Robert must not fly.

She rocked him by his shoulder.

"What?" Robert opened his eyes sleepily.

"We want you to come with us tonight," she said.

"But you're going to drop me from a million miles up."

Portia, knowing trust came easily to Robert, smiled. "No, we're not. We wouldn't really do that. We've decided you can join us."

Robert, believing her, smiled back.

The doorknob to Robert's bedroom twisted silently, and a wedge of darkness crept in.

"Let's go," Portia hissed. Robert, who had lain awake wondering if she would ever come, stripped his pillowslip, climbed out of bed, and put on his slippers. He followed Portia quietly out the bathroom window.

He was in ecstasy. The stars were like the bright, punched designs in the tin lampshades his mother sold; only the stars were much denser, much finer, more meticulously patterned. But he didn't have time to look — the girls had sped out ahead of him in the moonless night, passing the church's tall spire, making for the outside of town.

The island of lights dwindled and vanished behind him; the dark sea of hayfield and pasture swelled up beneath. But Robert was suddenly afraid. He did not know how to guide himself by the stars; though below him a lone floodlight broke out over some farmer's barnyard, there were no recognizable landmarks. Where were they leading him?

Sensing something amiss, Robert decided to turn back before he lost sight of town entirely. But when he banked, he heard the girls cry out. Seeing he had turned, they had given chase.

It was a trick, after all. He couldn't fly fast enough. The wind was against him, and he had trouble angling his pillowslip to get up any speed. It was hard to stay airborne. Still, he thought he might have the advantage; smaller and lighter than any of the girls, he might be faster and more maneuverable.

But the girls, who were more experienced, rapidly closed the gap. He wouldn't have time to reach the safety of home. Searching fearfully for some out, he saw the yellow sodium lights illuminating the church and the tent which had been set up beside it for the July Fourth barbecue; then the dark rectangle of the immense bell tower caught his eye. Here was a chance, he thought, and let his pillowslip luff until he had dropped even with the bell.

He hovered, hesitant. The church's single bell, so big he could stand inside it upright, occupied most of its housing. It was hard to tell exactly how much room there was — a long shelf between the bell and the clock blocked the floodlight — but there seemed to be something inside to sit on. He headed cautiously for the darkness surrounding the bell.

But he was rudely bounced back. Chicken wire. The open part of the tower had been screened in to keep out pigeons. Searching quickly, he found that there was an access window; it was open. He slid in, knocking one slipper off as he did so, and cowered, clinging to the rickety staging he found inside.

In a moment, the girls were at the tower, pillowslips close-hauled as they headed into the wind. When his sister passed him, the look on her face was one of puzzlement.

Heart pounding, Robert remained unseen. Suddenly, shrieks rang out. Two sets. One coming from somewhere far above, and the second from the girls. The first were shrieks of the hunter; the second, those of the hunted. The cries reverberated in the bell, disturbing its sleep.

Robert peered through the screen and looked up. At first he could see nothing more than the twinkling stars, but then he noticed a few were twinkling more than they should. Some of them winked out entirely.

Then he saw them. Three dark figures dropping out of the sky. When they swooped into the ambient light, he knew what they were — some of the bullies from school.

They had learned to fly. And they had learned quickly, too. They had the girls flying in circles, fighting hard to stay airborne. Two boys flanked Portia; she dropped from between them and arced into the beam of the spire's lights and then out again. A third boy sped after Sally, who kicked her legs like a racing swimmer and gained distance. But the girls were tiring quickly.

Unexpectedly, the boys sped away in a long, high orbit like comets, and then they dropped in for the kill.

Robert had to do something. As the girls swung by the bell tower for perhaps the last time, he opened the window and waved his pillowslip like a flag. "Here!" he called.

The girls heard him and made a beeline for the window. One by one, they

slid through and landed on the staging with a thump. Quickly, Robert snapped shut the window. The boys dived for the tower.

One by one, they crashed into the invisible chicken wire and dropped.

A silence followed that was so complete it was as if all of the town's five thousand people had caught their breaths in their dreams at once.

Then the bell awoke. Robert and the girls clapped their hands over their ears and wept as it clanged and boomed.

Robert and Portia sat on her unmade bed, fingers grimy with newsprint. They had read this one clipping many times.

One of the three boys had suffered a broken wrist in his tumble from the tower and onto the barbecue tent. All three of the boys, however, had suffered the questioning of the police after the pastor had phoned in the vandalism; the tent, which had saved the boys' lives, had suffered, too.

The boys professed innocence. They had only been trying to bag sleeping pigeons in their pillowslips.

The police chief had found a slipper with Robert's name in it and returned it to his mother. Robert hadn't had time to recover it; he and the girls had escaped from the tower just as the town cruiser was about to discover the boys on the church green.

Robert had no explanation for the slipper. Though neither he nor the girls had really done anything wrong, he and Portia felt the slipper was evidence. Evidence that incriminated their dreams.

"You won't tell, will you?" Portia asked. She had apologized to Robert earlier, saying she never would have dropped him; she only wanted to scare him a little.

"I never did tell anyone," Robert said. "They figured it out for themselves."

"Or they watched us, and learned." She folded up the clipping and then tore it once, twice, and tossed it in her wastebasket. "None of us are flying again. We've all made a pact, right?"

He nodded, but asked, "Maybe someday?" Portia shook her head. Soon, it didn't matter, anyway. Autumn descended upon summer in a flurry of fallen leaves and hoarfrost, and school started in earnest, and so there was no time to think about flying. And when summer arrived again, the children had begun to grow like willows in a well-watered ditch. No longer light enough to sail on just a pillowslip and a breeze, they turned to other interests.

Except for Robert, who still flew in his dreams.

*

Michael Johnson lives in Vermont, where he is MIS Director for a video production and duplication firm. He spends the rest of his time renovating a 140-year-old house and writing. This story was inspired by a dream he had of flying to work with a pillowslip for wings.

Allison Fiona Hershey is an artist, art director, and writer living in Southern California. Her published work has graced computer software, science fiction and fantasy publications, and numerous magazines.

Artwork by Allison Hershey

MZB Talks to Writers:

The One Reason for Rejection

Whatever reasons I may give for rejection — and I have a computerized list of about thirty reasons, all very subjective — most boil down to one reason or set of reasons:

1) Your main character is not interesting enough,

2) the odds are not stacked high enough against him or her, or

3) the goal is not worthwhile enough.

There is one other good reason: I've just bought a story on a similar theme and can't use another one so soon. This is the "No Fault" rejection.

For some reason stories run in cycles. I'm just coming out of a period of getting a dryad story or two in every mailing; they're the "in" subject, I suppose, getting as popular as dragons. I once conjectured that everyone has to write a dragon story; it's just The Thing To Do. (And they all send them to me!) Dragons have been very over-done, and even if I'm very picky it seems that I end up with at least one in every issue.

So perhaps I'm overstocked, or I just bought a good story on what seems to me the same theme, and I couldn't use a similar story so soon. For some reason I just recieved a whole slew of stories about unicorns. I bought one and I'm looking forward to sharing it with you, but if you're writing about unicorns — no matter how good your story — I will probably let the subject alone for a while. The story I bought is by Cynthia Mc Quillin and is probably the best unicorn story I've printed since the one by the (regretably) late Robert Cook which I published in my first anthology, **GREYHAVEN**.

Of course, all unicorn stories must compete in my mind with Theodore Sturgeon's classic "The Silken-Swift" just as all vampire stories must compete in my mind with Bram Stoker's **DRACULA**, and now also with Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's admirable stories of Saint Germain. This tells you a little about my standards. If you're going to write dragon stories, it is inevitable that people will compare them with the work of Anne McCaffrey — not only for quality of writing, but to see if you have done something new and different or are simply re-writing someone else's dragons. Every time you write a story about a vampire, a unicorn, a dragon, you are competing with one of these classics, and very few young writers can meet the challenge.

> Cows, for instance; it's a wide-open field.

So think up a new subject — don't compete with the greats. If everybody sets his story in a bar or tavern, start yours some place else. We haven't had a story set in a bakery for some time now. If dryads are over-done, think up a new subject that isn't. Cows, for instance; it's a wide-open field. If lots of people are writing variations on "knight slays dragon and wins princess" (and believe me, even all the "clever new twists" on this plot have been done to death) find a different folk-tale plot. How about the Pied Piper? Let's see, in the original story the town paid him to get rid of rats; what about having them pay him to get rid of teenagers and their music? (Or whatever your pet hate is.)

The point is that if your story is going to stand out in the crowd, it either has to be very, very good, or very, very different. Simply being different won't get it published, of course, it *still* has to be good. But being different will get it noticed. And in the world of the slush-pile, being noticed is an essential first step.

Writers Talk Back:

Shooting the Sacred Cows

by Parke Godwin

Consider the tale of the Emperor's New Clothes and remember that nothing will accumulate so much nonsense-mystique as art, nor the plainest common sense that can't be misconstrued. I've always hated mystiques because they're fuzzy-sighted and don't give you the score. This goes for all such attitudes, from the craft I've worked at for twenty-plus years to the poignant Lost Love of my youth whom I refuse to remember in rose-tinted hues or any illumination other than clear daylight.

It's amazing even today, after so many reams of straightforward words have been written about writing by those who know, that people still cling to distortions and misconceptions. This time out, for what it's worth, let's make ground chuck out of a few sacred cows.

"Write what you know." How often have you heard this from instructors in creative writing classes and/or workshops? And how often is it misinter-

preted and misapplied! Legions of earnest young writers brooding over their typewriters tended to assume this meant the specific circumstances of their own lives — where they'd been and worked, the people known, loved and hated — or else they weren't writing honestly.

Come on...think about that. Were this axiom strictly true, Herman Melville would have more 'honestly' written the life of a customs clerk than **MOBY DICK**, thus assuring that he would be unread by generations. Shakespeare might have penned the obscure chronicle of a glover's son turned raffish actor: **GOING DOWN WITH MARLOWE AT THE MERMAID**. Stephen Crane would not have written **THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE** at twenty-two before ever seeing a battle. I'd never have dared to write **BELOVED EXILE** at any age, having never been female, let alone a Celtic queen or even a king for that matter. And yet even my own brother Earl swallowed this notion whole and turned out thousands of words of narrow, slice-of-his-own-life stories before using his imagination and writing a story that was snapped up instantly and anthologized three times since.

Now that the point's been made and perhaps flayed, I'll do a one-eighty reverse. The axiom is entirely true — but, as in the application of Stanislavsky, the crucial point is how you interpret 'what you know' and that elusive commodity 'truth'. Actually you know far more than you may realize, but as a writer you must resist the human tendency to suppress unpleasant memories or to remember others through tinted glasses. The writer remembers what was and sees what is in order to create honestly what could be.

Consider the basic physical and emotional knowledge already in your catalog. You know what sharp hunger feels like, and exhaustion. If you're a mother you know day by day the primal experience of pregnancy and birth. If you've ever had a close brush with death, you know what mortal fear feels like in your stomach, and the abnormal exhilaration that follows the resultant rush of adrenaline. You know joy and sadness, how it feels to find or lose a love, and the helpless grief of a death too near, too soon. In short you know the sound, scent and feel of your own humanity which, you're finding out or have known for some time, is much like that of everyone else. With this priceless insight, you've gone from contemplating your own subjective belly button to knowing the world's.

In the 1960 movie ***THE SUBTERRANEANS***, one woman bitterly warns another against falling in love with a writer —

"Writers watch themselves live. 'Now I'm happy, now I'm in pain...'"

You better believe we do, we must. We're always writing, noting descriptions, shamelessly eavesdropping on conversations, aural/visual burglars purloining bits of our own and other people's lives, playing with words, putting our most casual speech into quote marks and paragraphs, observing ourselves and others as we stumble through life. In the worst and most ecstatic moments of his/her existence, the writer is diligently mining this inexhaustible vein of gold: the human quality and condition. This is not just what writers do but what we *are*.

The practice becomes habit and habit has its price. Besides collaborating on three books, Marvin Kaye and I were for years mutual father-confessors. On one of those black evenings when I felt the world had shot me down, I poured out my cry of the heart, on and on impassionedly to Marvin who listened sympathetically, then nodded and said, "You played that rather well."

Played? I gaped at him and then blew up. "Played? I'm not acting, you —. I *mean* it!"

But I knew what he meant. We get so used to observing and filing moments away that everything is grist and after a while nothing seems spontaneous. I've even seen this habit taken to classic lengths. Among my tenderer memories is a wonderful night spent with another novelist. When I woke in the morning, vastly the better for wear, and peered foggily about, I found the lady across the room in an armchair, writing rapidly. She gave me a dazzling, reminiscent smile and went on scribbling furiously to get the experience on paper before it faded. She used it wholecloth in a subsequent novel. Q.E.D.

These are some of the things you already know, the basic equipment in your kit, jealously hoarded and judiciously used by anyone who makes all or much of their income from fiction. Those who ignore or distance themselves from this treasure out of emotional squeamishness — and you'd be surprised how legion they are — can usually be found in slush piles, return-routed with form rejection slips.

Among other crippling absurdities is the notion that one needs the proper surroundings and atmosphere to write. This is a world-class excuse for not writing at all. Scott Fitzgerald scurried all over France and Spain searching for *the* place where he could work, until an exasperated Tom Wolfe (who wrote at home on an ice-box packing crate) screamed at him, "For God's sake, you can write in a *closet* if you have to!"

The right place to work is where you are now.

Surroundings? One friend of mine has an office in his expensive house that's a writer's dream: light, air-conditioned, state of the art processor and printer, file cabinets, the right kind of typing chair, even his bond paper in a precisely squared-off stack — all this and talent besides. The problem is that he writes very little because he has a hard time believing in himself and can't handle rejection. There are many comfortable ways to die.

Then there's that irridescent but irrelevant word 'inspiration'. When and how does it strike or speak to you as the Burning Bush to Moses?

It doesn't; it ain't even the right word. If you're not yet published but serious and determined, the magic word is discipline. You plunk down at the appointed hour and do it. If you're already published, the catalyzing terms (for me at least) are 'contract' and 'deadline'. Variations on this theme are 'rent' and 'foreseeable expenses'. For a real jumpstarter, there's 'taxes due, please remit' — which, motivationally speaking, is enough to bring Excalibur out of my stone with the speed of a switchblade. With a contracted book in progress and these facts staring me in the face, I get inspired around 8:30 a.m. five to six days a week.

So there it is. Never swallow a mystique whole, especially about the art and craft of writing. Mystiques obscure and distort rather than clarify. It's just that people are always looking for magic wands and miracles in plain method and hard work. You'll be way ahead if you head these asinine conceptions off at the pass and hammer out your own definitions about the writer in you and what he/she does and how.

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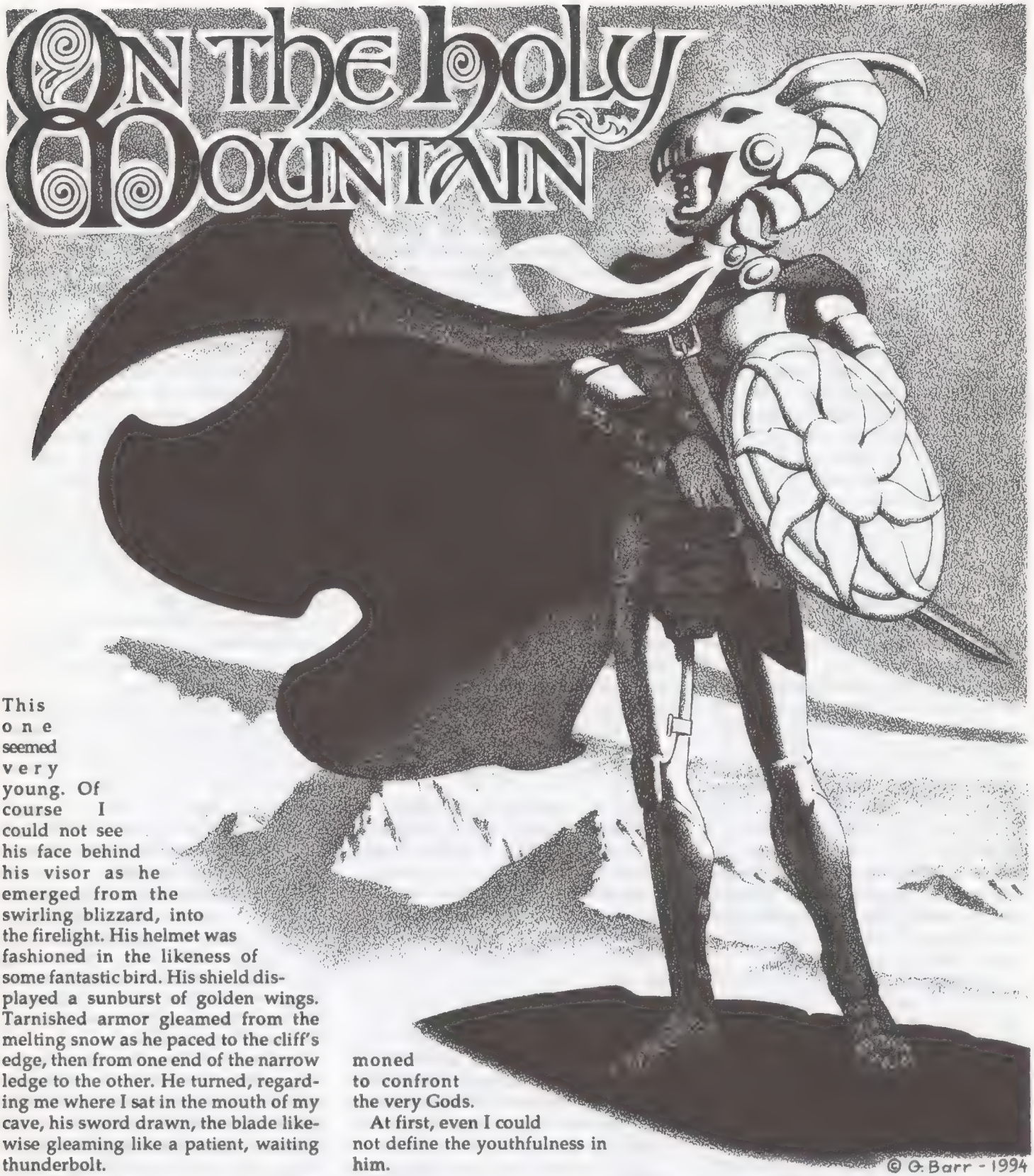
On the Holy Mountain



by Darrell Schweitzer

This one seemed very young. Of course I could not see his face behind his visor as he emerged from the swirling blizzard, into the firelight. His helmet was fashioned in the likeness of some fantastic bird. His shield displayed a sunburst of golden wings. Tarnished armor gleamed from the melting snow as he paced to the cliff's edge, then from one end of the narrow ledge to the other. He turned, regarding me where I sat in the mouth of my cave, his sword drawn, the blade likewise gleaming like a patient, waiting thunderbolt.

But he seemed young, not that there was any boyish hesitancy in his step. Nor did his slight stature suggest weakness; for having come thus far proved him the bravest of the brave, a member of the divine elect, one of those heroes among the Knights Inquisitor summoned to confront the very Gods.

At first, even I could not define the youthfulness in him.

"Sit," I said, raising a hand. "Rest and be refreshed before your final ordeal."

He said nothing. I leaned forward, my own black, rusting armor reflecting no light. I must have seemed an apparition to him, a corpse rising from the moldy, frozen

earth.

I showed him my empty hands.

"I bid you sit."

"You have not said, Sir, that you are not my foe." There was no hesitancy in that voice either.

"I offer you my hospitality. Is that not enough?"

"It is." He nodded, and sat, his back to the cold, his sword across his lap.

That was it. He *deferred* to me, ever so subtly, as an older man would not have. I observed that he winced, shifting his weight, unable to make himself comfortable. When he raised his visor, his breath came in a cloudy burst. I beheld a long, pale face, a fringe of yellow hair across a smooth forehead, a wisp of a moustache on his lip — and exhaustion and the relentless denial of pain in his watery eyes.

"You are wounded."

"A trifle," he said.

I took his metal-gloved hand in my own, and by signs, by secret, whispered words, he knew me and I him.

"*You too!*" he exclaimed. "You too serve the Righteous Nine Gods!"

"I am Sir Belcerak, and I do serve them, unworthy as I am."

He drew his hand away, for the first time uncertain. "But — but, *none* of the Brotherhood may be called unworthy, not *on the holy mountain* — that isn't possible!"

I made no answer, but pushed his hands and his sword aside, and unbound his thigh-piece, cutting away at the leather and wool underneath. His leg was slick with blood, but the wound did not look fatal. An inch further to the left, and it would have been.

While I worked on him, I bade him tell me his tale.

"... in the fury of the fight, in the deep snows, my father fell, Lord Mondavois of the Winter Lands, and five dukes beside him, yet we did not yield —"

"Against whom did you fight?"

"Against the armies of the Shadow Titans, wild-haired man-things, led by sorcerers who rode chariots of black cloud and raging wind. I think the Titans themselves were on the field, in the heart of the storm —"

"Yet all storms come to an end —"

"And the light of the Nine Gods shall pierce the darkness, yes, as the sun dispels the storm. But we few who were alive that morning thought it our last hour. Gladly we hurled ourselves onto the foe, an offering to the Nine. Then I tumbled from my horse. I saw a great light. I thought I was dead, that my soul's journey had truly begun —"

I bound up his wound and replaced the thigh-armor. He let out a little grunt of pain as I tied the leather thongs.

"But you know where you are, don't you?" I said.

"The Mount of Halderon —"

"The world's axle —"

"Whereon the earth and sky turn like great wheels —"

"By design of the gods —"

"By their will —"

"And in their service —"

We were reciting from the catechism of our Order. There was comfort in the familiar words. He clasped my hand again, desperately; with a young man's desperation that amid the corruption of the world *ideals* remain, alone, unassailable.

"It is therefore impossible, Sir Belcerak, that any unworthy knight could be here, for the gods would not allow such a thing, and the perils on the way would surely have prevented it."

He let go of me. I sat back, receding into the darkness, possibly invisible to his eyes.

"Ah, yes, the perils. I recall a dragon, a lake of fire, a skull that spoke beguilingly —"

"And more! You overcame them all!" He fumbled to sheathe his sword.

"Incidentally," I said, "you have yet to give me your name. I have already given you mine."

His hand fell to his sword, instinctively, then he truly blushed. His pale face could not hide it. "I — I — it must be my weariness. I'm not thinking — I crave your *pardon*, courteous sir, and beg you take no offense —"

"Don't worry about it." I dipped a cup into the pot that hung over the fire. "Here. Have some supper."

He sipped the hot, thick soup. "I am called Garede."

"*Sir* Garede, then —" I nodded, acknowledging the white scarf he wore around his neck, and the scarlet badge pinned to it.

He chewed on something hard in the soup, then spat it out. "I am an initiate, but I shall only be worthy of the title *Sir* once I have attained the summit of Halderon and looked upon the Nine Gods —"

"May that time be very soon. Perhaps on the morrow."

"Yes. Soon."

Weariness overcame him. He all but fell asleep in my arms. I eased him down by the fire, into the cave, and covered him with my ragged cloak. Then I sat in the cold, regarding him while the flames burned low.

"Sir Belcerak," he said suddenly, startling me.

"Yes?"

"You haven't explained anything about yourself."

"Consider the possibility," I said, "that a true hero might come this far, but fail, due to some grievous fault within himself, then find himself stranded, unable to either rise or descend."

"That doesn't make ... any sense ..." He muttered something more and was asleep.

I rose from his side and walked out into the storm, to the rim of the cliff, where the wind and the darkness cried out to me in a thousand unintelligible voices. I stood, like some sorcerer's automaton waiting for life, until the storm cleared away and I saw the stars. But they were only stars in a cloud-ragged sky, and the Gods did not appear behind them, nor, out of the darkness, did the Shadow Titans rise up; and there was no revelation.

There I remained until dawn, thinking of Sir Garede: *Could he be the one who would set me free at last?*

There is so much more to tell, and so little. The youth rose. We performed the holy rituals of our Order, which words may not express, surrendering our lives once more, as the Knight Inquisitor does every day, to the Nine.

Then we broke our fast and began our ascent, speaking little, our swords and shields slung over our backs. It seemed like a thousand years since I had last left that campsite. Perhaps it was.

We faced challenges and temptations. A false knight of living ice, whose touch was death. Gold, gleaming in the air, beyond the edge of a precipice. Beautiful *lamiae* who sang and bade us rest. Crags of stone grinding together, like the fingers of a wrestler clasping and unclasping in his sleep. Once we seemed not to be on a mountain at all, but by a lakeside, where a ship formed out of flowers and smoke, and my own wife, long dead, beckoned me to come aboard. At least that was what I saw. Sir Garede's visor was down. He did not speak. I could only see his startled

eyes through the metal slits. I don't know what he saw.

When he seemed to fail, I raised him up in my arms, whispering, "The Holy Gods. Think on them. The Gods are very near to us now."

Amid searing black rain, I clung to his belt, and was but a burden to him, as his fingers and feet found purchase for us both on the face of a sheer cliff.

"In the end," he said, gasping, "we shall reach the furthest East, where the shadows of the Titans rise, and break up their temple into shards and small stones."

"Into the very dust," I hissed between my teeth. We were reciting again. Again, there was comfort in it.

"Surely you are the bravest of the brave," he said, "the purest of the ascended masters of our sacred Order —"

I let him think so.

What more? We reached the top, the utmost peak of Halderon, where the mountain's face drops straight down for nearly a mile. After so long a contest, we stood at the edge of the seemingly endless abyss, looking out over the clouds into the azure distance, breathing hard. He fell to his knees in thanksgiving. I knelt beside him, silent.

I had been here before, and I knew what to expect.

Nothing happened. The Nine Gods did not appear. In story, in song, in the chanted history of the Knights Inquisitor, it was clear enough: when the hero attains the summit of Halderon, the Nine Gods rise up in their blinding glory. The knight averts his eyes, and the holy breath touches him, like a gentle, burning wind. The inexpressible, incomprehensible words of divine speech confirm him, and he is truly the servant of the Nine forever, invincible and incorruptible —

But nothing happened. Sir Garede turned to me, as bewildered as a child.

"I think I can explain," I said, and I told him my own tale, how I had come to this mountain from a desert far south of the Crescent Sea, where we Righteous Ones had been locked in battle with the unbelievers. Amid the swirling sand and furnace heat, I seemed to be drifting, as Sir Garede had, into a brilliant light. I too thought I was dead, and for many years I desperately wished to believe that what followed had been the illusion of a dying mind as I lay trampled beneath the hooves of the enemy's horses. "But no," I said, "I was truly here."

Said Sir Garede: "I don't understand —"

"— because I have not finished the tale. The Nine Gods called me to the Mountain of Trials, *but I could not find my way*. The disaster was in my own heart, though I did not know it yet. I wandered over the slopes, in and out of gorges and caves, overcoming all obstacles, but the upward path remained

Artwork by George Barr

ever hidden from me. Then I met a brother knight, who was truly my brother."

"As we are all brothers, who serve the Nine —"

I raised my hand for silence. This was the confession of a fallen man, a catechism of evil, and I hoped he was ignorant of it.

"He really *was* my brother, my father's first-born, called Sir Tahenivar, the greatest hero of our age, in whose shadow I had lived all my life. Whatever my deeds, men always said of me, 'He is but the brother of Tahenivar and shall never equal him.' Worse yet, it was true. But that day my brother welcomed me, celebrating that we two should ascend to the Gods together. He knew the way, and led me to this sacred place quickly and directly. And the Nine Gods appeared in all their glory, *to him*. I beheld only clouds and sky, but by the ecstasy on his face, by the way he averted his eyes, I knew that *he alone* had achieved the divine vision. That was when the rather obvious contagion within myself burst forth like the stuff of an overripe pustule. I hated my brother. I committed a terrible crime."

As I paused in the telling, Sir Garede rose to his feet. From the look on his face and the sound of his voice, I think he was actually afraid of me. Still I knelt before him.

"What did you do?" he asked softly.

"I killed him. I drove my poniard through the mail between his shoulders. He cried out, trying to say something—I don't know what; his mouth was full of blood — and I just let him ... fall ... down, down, probably forever. I dream of him tumbling still in the empty air."

"And *then* ..."

"And then I waited for the Gods to destroy me, but I felt only the wind on my face. For a ridiculous instant, I laughed aloud, thinking I had gained some kind of triumph. But there was only the silence. And much later, when I could not find my way *down* below the ledge where you met me, as hunger and cold and old age failed to harm me, as brother knights came, made their way to the top — or, yes, as I led them there — and came away in grief, I understood that I had so profaned the holy mountain that the Gods would never appear again, until some perfect champion should cleanse the place of the abomination inhabiting it, which is myself."

Sir Garede stepped away from me. "*You* are a madman!"

I rose to my feet. "Quite possibly. A madman, responsible for the failure of all."

"This *cannot* be!"

"Look around you. It *is*."

"I could kill you." His face was wild now.

I knelt once more, bending my head, crossing my hands on my breastplate. "Try to. Strike off my head. But don't let hatred poison your heart. Do it in pure, righteous anger."

He half drew his sword, then let it slide back into his scabbard. "You were kind to me — I cannot —"

I leapt to my feet, and before he seemed to realize what I was doing, I unslung my black shield and drew my sword. I struck him a foul blow before he was ready, aiming behind the knee. "I think you can —"

He stepped nimbly aside, drew blade, raised shield, and with a mighty cry joined battle. We fought throughout the day. I would have killed him if I could, as I have killed so many, for the curse on me demands it, compounding my sin.

"I am the last trial of Mount Halderon," I gasped, when we paused for an instant. "The knight who is truly worthy, for whom the Nine Gods shall once more show themselves, he alone shall be able to slay me. No other."

"I am that one!" screamed Sir Garede as he rushed at me.

I held him off easily, and we conversed over the tops of our shields. "Pride, like jealousy, corrodes the soul. This task requires not merely a strong arm and a sharp sword, but *moral perfection*, which, of course, your rage precludes. Can you appreciate the irony? The Gods are having their little joke on us."

"It is but the last trial. The victory is nearly mine," he said.

"If only I could believe you —"

Garede cursed and we fought on, dealing each other terrible wounds, battering swords on shields and armor until both blood and sparks filled the air and the heavens rang with the sounds of our combat. Many times one of us came near the brink of the abyss, then the other.

And finally I struck the visor from his helmet, and turned for just an instant to watch it whirling out over the clouds.

In that instant, my opponent saw his opening, and drove his sword with all his might through my heart, until the hilt clanged on my shattered breastplate.

I felt only a faint chill within, and a sensation as if I were hollow and a few grains of sand trickled down within my chest. Nothing more. No pain or weakness followed the initial shock, even after several minutes.

I begin to weep, for I knew he had failed. He was not the one. While I stood transfixed, he backed away in horror, and would have fallen over the cliff, had I not caught him by the arm and pulled him away.

"No," I said.

"Will you kill me?"

"You are neither my enemy nor my friend. I had hoped for more from you." I drew out his sword and offered it to him in ritual fashion, the pommel on my wrist. But he let it drop to the ground.

"What now?" He wept, too, but like a child.

"You return to the world. I merely wait."

"I can't go back, knowing what I know —"

I took him by both shoulders and held him as a father might when comforting his son. "You are not alone. *All* of the masters of the Order hold this secret within them, that they have *not* seen the Gods, that their courage and strength are merely the courage and strength of men. Yet they do not flinch from their tasks. Perhaps it is enough. Go —"

He fell faint at my feet, from his many wounds.

Once more I tended him as best I could, and carried him down the mountain for a time. When he tried to walk he fell and could not rise. He had lost too much blood.

"Thought shall be harder," he recited, almost in a singsong, *"heart shall be keener, heroes the greater —"*

"...as our strength fails." I finished the verse for him as he died in the snow, a worthy man, but not a perfect one, whom I had murdered because he could not set me free.

I took his helmet and his shield into my cave, to hang with the others. Then I sat down again by the fire, to wait, afraid that, but for such interruptions, I would have to wait forever.

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Letters

YOU *CAN* TAKE IT WITH YOU

Carolyn Keenan, Dearborn, MI

I am being sent home to Australia and I need to find out how I can continue to subscribe to the Magazine. Having realized what a vast and supportive community of writers (and readers) exists in this country, I would hate to be cut off from it. Your magazine has provided me with much more than a few good stories to read! The interviews with authors, the writing tips, the 'name-dropping' of literary greats that 'should be read' ... it just goes on and on. And perhaps the best of all is the insight into the lives of the contributors — who they are, who writes full time, who squishes it in between jobs/babies/etc.

See the regular subscription form for overseas rates. Unfortunately, we have to charge more for overseas postage than for the magazine itself if we hope to have it arrive sometime this decade! But in spite of it, we have subscribers from all over the Pacific Rim and Europe — to say nothing of all our friends in Canada (who get a better deal on postage). —HRJ

GIFT SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR FRIENDS YOU'VE NEVER MET

Jan Combs, Wichita, KS

The combination of your opening editorial with "MZB Talks to Writers: My Very Own Slush Pile" reminded me that you bought my first story ("An Equitable Division" Spring 1994) the month after my subscription lapsed. I realize this was coincidental, but it was a dandy memory jog: the occasion of frantic sorting through my piling system for the elapsed subscription notice.

Also, while buying subscriptions for one's friends and aunts is an excellent idea, buying a subscription for one's local library branch would give more potential subscribers a chance to preview the magazine. Most libraries will welcome the gift, and will accept back issues if one can bear to part with them. One might want to check with the library about their gift policies, as most are government institutions and have bureaucracies entrenched.

What a delightful idea. I have always been an enthusiastic supporter of public libraries — and these days they need all the support they can get. — MZB

MONEY WELL SPENT

Peter Badzey, Huntington Beach, CA

I received my first issue of MZB FM (a sample copy) recently and must congratulate you on the high quality of the magazine. The authors did an excellent job of keeping my interest and entertaining me while making me think about their messages. It is precisely this kind of fantasy that I enjoy.

For this reason, I am enclosing a subscription form and a check. I had originally asked for a sample copy so that I might find out what stories are appropriate for the magazine and send you works of my own. However, even if MZB FM never publishes a single one of my works, I will consider the money well spent anyway.

I'm glad other people enjoy the same kinds of fantasy that Marion and I do. We appreciate your letter — and your subscription check. This kind of "voting" helps us continue to exist. — REH

NOT DISAPPEARED, JUST DIVERTED

Louise Rowder, San Jose, CA

In the last issue of your magazine, you seemed a bit depressed about the people who had submitted to you and then disappeared, never to be heard from again. Two years ago, your magazine is where I made my very first fiction submission. It was a terrible manuscript and I received the dreaded "earthquake" rejection. The following month, your editorial explained the letter and that was some comfort to me. It always seems as if you're talking to me directly in your editorials.

Since that time, I've tried to improve as a writer and hope I've had some very modest success. I have made two fiction sales to anthologies. I'm a long way from mastering the craft of storytelling, but I will always try to learn and, I hope, improve. I'm an engineer and perhaps science fiction comes more naturally to my hand than fantasy, but fantasy is so much fun!

Well, congratulations on your sales, and do try us again some day. — MZB

... AND PUBLISHED IT, TOO!

In one of those strange, Twilight Zone type of coincidences, I had just borrowed and was reading the first eight of the SWORD AND SORCERESS books when your subscription offer came in the mail. I became very excited, but made myself stop and think whether or not I could truly afford to spend the money. Then, I noticed that the checks were to be made out to Marion and my fate was sealed. After having just read eight prologues of "guidelines", how could I possibly resist the chance to be able to tell people, "I wrote something and Marion Zimmer Bradley accepted it!"

Ironically, this delightful letter did not have a signature, and by the time I noticed that fact, it had become irrevocably separated from the subscription form it arrived with. Let this be a lesson about putting proper headings on letters! If the writer recognizes him/herself, please drop us a card so we can give you proper credit next issue. — HRJ

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A Dragon on the Premises

by John P. Buentello

Gwen first saw the dragon on Monday morning, when she was leaving for work. The dragon was on the kitchen counter, nibbling on the edge of a piece of toast she'd left there the night before. Gwen passed by the kitchen, and the image of the mouse-sized dragon imprinted itself on her mind before it scuttled away and vanished behind the refrigerator.

"Great," she said out loud as she picked up the half-eaten toast and tossed it in the garbage. "Now I have mice."

Gwen knew it wasn't a mouse she had seen. It was a dragon. A tiny dragon perhaps, but a dragon just the same. The problem was there weren't such things as dragons. They didn't exist. So the creature had to have been a mouse that just looked like a small dragon in the kitchen light. Thus the effect of a low wattage bulb helped her mind to explain away what it had just seen.

"Well, I've got a little surprise for you," she said to the empty kitchen. Empty, that is, save for the dragon hiding behind the refrigerator. She opened a drawer filled with tools and nails and bits of metal odds and ends and drew out a small mousetrap. After setting a piece of bologna in the center of the trap, she set it and carefully placed it on the floor in front of the refrigerator.

"There," she said while she washed her hands in the sink. "That should take care of you."

When she returned from work that evening, she found she'd been wrong about that. The trap was empty. It had been sprung, but after picking it up in her hand, Gwen could see why it hadn't worked. The spring bar that should have caught the little bugger by the neck had been melted in two by a very hot flame. One edge of the trap was completely charred.

Gwen frowned at the ruined trap and slid her eyes toward the refrigerator. She shrugged and set the ruined trap on the edge of the sink. She had a promising date tonight, and there was no time to worry about strange rodents. Tomorrow, she'd buy some poison.

The dragon appeared again a week later, and this time, it made a sizable impression. Gwen hadn't seen a mouse all week. The poison she'd left out must have done the trick. She was reclining in the bathtub, thinking about the presentation she'd have to make for Castle & Co., the firm she worked for. The tub was brimming with soap bubbles and felt luxuriously warm. Gwen was beginning to lose her train of thought and slip off to sleep when she turned her head slightly and saw the dragon.

It was standing at the edge of the bathroom doorway, peering at her with a curious look on its face. Gwen's mouth fell open at the sight of it. The dragon had tan and gold scales running across the length of its back. A pair of small wings moved slightly along its shoulders. The dragon stared at her with wide, golden-colored eyes, and blew a tiny ring of smoke that smelled of sulfur. It was about the size of a squirrel now, and its claws made tapping noises as it edged across the linoleum floor. It regarded her a moment longer, then turned and disappeared into the hall.

After that Gwen began to find all kinds of evidence of the dragon's existence. Cupboard doors she was certain she'd closed the night before were found open, with little teeth marks along the edges of the knobs. Cereal boxes and bags of rice sported neatly round, charred holes where the dragon had been at them. There was a constant smell of sulfur in the kitchen. Little gray pellets, what Gwen guessed to be dragon droppings, were showing up everywhere.

> Dragons already grown to house size may require repeated visits.

Gwen set traps and sprinkled out more poison. Nothing seemed to work. She got a cat, but it sneezed so much from the odor of the sulfur that she had to give it away. The dragon made another appearance. This time in the living room, as Gwen was busy watching a horror movie. Just as the monster in the film was getting ready to dispatch

its next victim, the dragon flapped across her field of vision and let loose with a tiny jet of flame. Gwen screamed and retreated to the bedroom. This time, the dragon had been the size of her former cat.

The dragon made itself pretty scarce after that, and Gwen decided she might as well try and live with it. She told no one about her uninvited pest, not even her closest friends. When she scheduled a date with someone, she always arranged to meet him at his place. Things seemed to be going along fine, with both of them staying out of each other's way. That's when Gwen came home from work to find her jewelry box had been burned open.

Bits of melted gold and silver, much of it fake anyway, lay strewn on the top of the dresser. The sapphire brooch her mother had given her, along with her grandmother's engagement ring, was gone. So were other odd earrings and pins. Gwen followed the trail of debris into the bathroom. That's when she found the dragon's egg.

As she moved about the bathroom, picking up the pieces of her scorched jewelry, she spied a round, cream-colored object lying in one corner of the room. At first she thought it was an old cotton ball, but when she picked it up, it felt coarse and leathery in her hand. One end of the slightly flattened sphere was torn open. The dried remains of a golden fluid clung to the hollow insides. Gwen frowned at the dragon's egg and threw it in the wastebasket along with her ruined jewelry.

"Enough is enough!" she shouted as she started back into the living room. It was time to get rid of whatever the thing was. The only question was, how? You couldn't just call someone up to take care of a dragon infestation, could you?

She found her answer in the phone book. After scanning two columns that promised to rid her house of every kind of pest except the one she had, her fingers came to rest on a peculiar ad: George's Exterminating Service. We Do It All! From Roaches to Silverfish to Dragons*. At the bottom of the page next to the asterisk was the disclaimer: 'Dragons already grown to house size may require repeated visits.' Gwen memorized the number and picked up the phone.

She felt a little stupid explaining her problem, but the voice on the other end of the line listened politely and promised to send someone out right away. Gwen hung up the phone and went to fix lunch. She found the loaf of bread burned opened and half eaten.

The knock on her door came a half hour later. Gwen opened it to see a short man with a balding pate dressed in overalls standing on her doorstep. He took the toothpick that had been jammed in the side of his mouth and threw it away. Then he bowed before her, clear down to his waist.

Artwork by George Barr

"You the lady that called about the dragon?" he asked as he rose again.

Gwen nodded. "At least that's what I think it is."

"Why don't we have a look?" He flashed her a smile that seemed too handsome to fit onto his face. "Mind if I come in?"

Gwen stepped to one side. The short man entered the house and began looking around. He turned around in circles, getting his bearings, then pointed a finger toward the left and raised his eyebrows at Gwen.

"The kitchen in there?"

Gwen nodded and followed him as he strode into the room. As she watched, he rifled through her cabinets, pushed aside her appliances, and poked along the edges of the walls. When he came upon a charred cereal box or a half-eaten soda cracker he turned it over and over in his hands, murmuring to himself. After putting everything back in order he turned back to Gwen.

"Where's the bedroom?"

"Now see here —"

"It's where you keep all your jewelry, isn't it?"

Gwen sighed and took him into the bedroom. He examined the burned jewelry box, then emptied the wastebasket in the bathroom after Gwen told him what she'd tossed into it. He stretched the leathery egg between his fingers, gave it an experimental sniff, then tossed it back in the trash.

"So how big is this dragon of yours?"

Gwen sat at the edge of the bed and described her encounters with the creature. When she described the dragon, she made note of how compassionate its golden eyes had seemed.

"Golden eyes, eh?" The short man scratched his head and looked at the ruined jewelry box again. "Your dragon's already at the hoarding stage. It thinks of this place as home. Looks like he doesn't mind sharing." He smiled at her. "I can see why."

"Is this a pretty common thing? I mean, dragons infesting a house and all?"

The man shrugged. "One dragon doesn't exactly make an infestation, at least not until it's grown up. Anyway, you get them now and then. You do live pretty far out in the sticks, lady."

"Call me Gwen," she told him.

He flashed his smile, looking around the room. "My name's George. Like I was saying, the farther out you build, the more likely you're gonna land in the middle of some critter's territory. You just got lucky enough to get a dragon."

Gwen put her forehead against the edge of the bedpost. "Some luck."

"Golden-eyed dragons do carry it. Once they're full-grown, they give good luck to whoever's near them. 'Course this one might get a little big once it's grown."

Gwen sat up straight. "How big?"

George rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "Oh, they usually top off at about fifty feet."

Gwen felt her face grow purple. "How am I supposed to live in the same house with a fifty-foot dragon?"

"Lots of folks wonder that same thing," George admitted. "Usually, you don't. I have to get rid of it before it gets that big."

"Well, get rid of it then!" she told him.

Gwen watched as George prepared to vanquish the dragon. He walked out to his truck and came back with a long, pointed lance which he laid on the floor of her living room. Next he brought in a box filled with an assortment of metal plates. These he put together a piece at a time, slipping them on various parts of his body as he worked. When he was done, he stood before her outfitted in a full suit of armor. Gwen noticed that inside his suit, he seemed a bit taller and somewhat huskier than before. His smile radiated out at her as he donned his helmet.

"It's just in case the little critter's learned how to shoot its flame straight. Would you mind handing me my lance?"

Gwen bent down and struggled to get the heavy pole into his hands. She stared at the wicked point at its end, and thought about the dragon's eyes once more. Despite the fact it had stolen her jewelry and scared her silly, she still felt for it.

"Do you really have to kill it?"

George pushed his faceplate down and stumbled toward the kitchen. "Don't worry," he called back. "I know what I'm doing."

Gwen watched as he came to stand in the middle of the kitchen. Lowering his lance, he bent to one knee and bellowed out an oath toward the far wall.

"Come out, wicked beast! Come meet the one destined to slay you, foul dragon!"

There was a rustling sound, and from a dark corner of the kitchen the dragon emerged. It was now the size of a beagle, and Gwen couldn't see how it could have been hiding in such a small kitchen. It regarded the armor-plated man standing before it, its eyes glowing brightly. A wisp of smoke escaped from its slightly parted jaws.

The dragon leaped forward, and Gwen turned away, unwilling to see the small creature slain. After a moment the sound of chewing met her ears, and she turned to see the dragon busily munching on the end of the lance. George had his faceplate up, and he grinned at her and lowered the lance to the floor.

"Get me that large cage from the back of the truck, will you?"

Gwen hurried outside and retrieved the cage. When she returned to the kitchen, George was kneeling by the dragon, gently stroking the scales running behind its neck. A sound like a purr came from deep inside the dragon's belly.

"I thought you were going to kill it," Gwen said as she handed over the cage.

"They're just like kittens when they're this age," George said. He picked up the dragon and put it into the cage. Then he stuck the end of the lance in through the bars for the dragon to chew on.

"Then why did you make that challenge?"

George shrugged. "It's part of the shtick. A dragon won't come if you simply call it to you. Only a knight can bring forth a dragon."

Gwen looked at George. He did look rather knightly standing there in her kitchen. She smiled and looked down at the dragon.

"So what are you going to do with it?"

"You mean with 'her'?" George corrected. "Take her to a place where she can grow up and have lots of little golden-eyed dragons."

"I thought knights were supposed to slay dragons."

George shook his head. "And kill off my only means of income? Truth to tell, I haven't killed a single roach or silverfish in my entire life. Dispatching, or sometimes relocating, dragons is my trade. It's sort of a family tradition." He picked up the cage and lance and started for the door. "I'll send you the bill, Gwen."

"Hey, George!" she called after him as he headed for the truck. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

George set the dragon in the back of the truck and began taking off his armor. "Like what?"

"Aren't you supposed to marry the fair damsel after saving her from the dragon?" Gwen said as she stared at his handsome face.

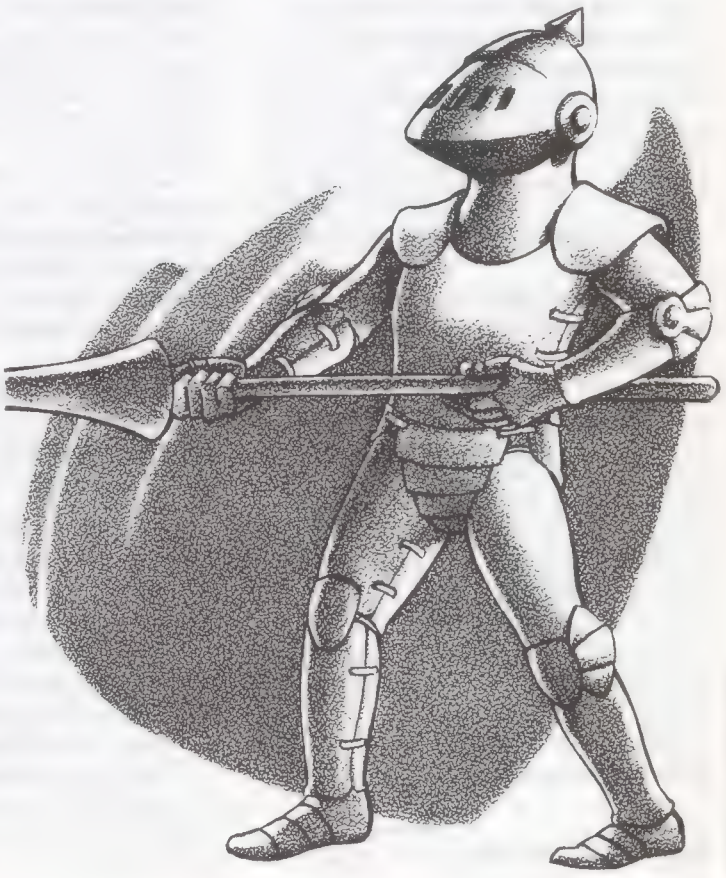
"I really should get this critter someplace safe," George told her. "As for marrying damsels, well, that's a part of the tradition I haven't looked into yet. Why don't we start off slow? How's dinner at eight sound to you, fair lady?"

Gwen laughed as he bent down to kiss her hand. "It sounds delightful, kind sir," she said. From the back of the truck the little dragon let out a miniature roar of approval.

❄

JOHN P. BUENTELLO lives in Texas and has had a number of stories published in the fantasy and horror field. He is currently at work on his first fantasy novel for children.

GEORGE BARR also illustrated two stories for us this issue — but he only had to do *one* dragon.



Artwork by George Barr

The Beginning of Tears

by Steven Piziks

Hajira defiantly clutched her mother's silver-backed hand mirror and glared across the perfumed gardens at Khamis, hoping he couldn't hear her pounding heart. Her eyes were dry — the tears had not yet begun.

"So the youngest daughter of the sorceress comes to defy me as well," Khamis mocked, then gestured at the seven heads that cast long shadows at his feet. Each one had the brand of a sorceress imprinted on its waxen cheek. "Tell me, girl, do you think you have enough power to avenge your parents and sisters?"

"I have enough," Hajira said, refusing to look at them. "More than enough."

Khamis's dark eyes glittered. "Show me." And a bolt of lightning tore toward her through the air. Hajira tightened her grip around the mirror and forced herself not to move. A moment before the bolt reached her, it glanced aside and smashed into a fig tree. The tree exploded, showering Hajira with fragments of wood. The hot smell of ozone mixed with sweet jasmine in Hajira's nostrils and the glass in the mirror cracked.

Hajira calmly straightened her veil before Khamis could get a look at her face, and forced her voice to remain steady. "You see? Not even the power you stole from my mother and sisters can harm me, Lazy Khamis."

"Don't call me that!" Khamis snarled. Bees and hornets swarmed from his robe and buzzed angrily across the garden. Each one died less than an arm's length from Hajira's veil. Fading sunlight caught the fresh inscription on the mirror's handle and the glass cracked again. One more spell and its power would vanish like water on the desert sands.

"Is that the best you can do?" Hajira called lightly. "Why, my mother taught me better than that almost before I could walk, and certainly long before she consented to become your teacher, Lazy Khamis. A monkey could learn more magic."

Khamis's handsome face grew stormy, then cleared. "I see through your tricks, Hajira. You want me to tire myself out. But I am not stupid."

"No. Just lazy."

"There are faster ways to power than what your mother taught." Khamis aimed a kick at one of the heads before him. Hajira wanted to lunge at him, claw at him with nails and teeth, but she forced herself to remain still. Khamis produced a bottle from his robe. "This is one of those ways."

"You are not disciplined in the ways of the Si'lat, Lazy Khamis," Hajira warned. "Give me that bottle before you do even more harm. It is mine by right. You are not only lazy, Khamis, you are a lazy *thief*."

Khamis face reddened. "You will die for mocking me, girl!" he replied shrilly. "This bottle belongs to the holder, and so does the Si'lat!"

He yanked out the stopper. A cloud of smoke gushed upward from the bottle and coalesced into a female form. This female, however, was over seven feet tall with glowing red eyes, long fangs, and black claws where her fingernails should have been. Naked breasts hung nearly to her waist and her lower half was a pillar of flame.

Hajira's heart began to pound again. All the djinni could work powerful magic, but the Si'lat were the elite, the sorceresses of the djinni. Hajira's grandmother's grandmother had battled for nine days and nine nights to force this one into servitude, and only three times since then had anyone in Hajira's family opened the bottle.

"What is your bidding, master?" the Si'lat growled.

Khamis stabbed a righteous finger in Hajira's direction. "Si'lat, that girl dared to mock me and call me thief. Destroy her!"

A clawed hand formed out of the Si'lat's pillar of fire and flashed across the garden toward Hajira, but at the last moment, it bounced sideways and exploded with a ***whump*** that left Hajira's ears ringing. The noise also hid the sound of glass shattering. The mirror's magic was gone.

"Apologies, master," the Si'lat said

tonelessly. "I was unable to do your bidding."

Were you listening, Khamis? Hajira thought. *She didn't say your bidding is impossible. If it were, her response would have been very different.*

"You see, Lazy Khamis?" she said aloud. "Not even the most powerful djinn can destroy me. Not with the power I wield."

"You lie!" Khamis snapped. "No one can withstand the power of a Si'lat."

Not even you, I would wager, Hajira thought. She held up the mirror.

"You would know it to be possible," she replied, "if you had spent more time studying than plotting thievery, Lazy Khamis. I have focused my power into this, my mother's mirror. The only way to release it is to use the name inscribed on the handle. It is my true name." Hajira tugged mockingly at her veil. "I tell you this, Lazy Khamis, because not even a thief like you can take the mirror from me. Neither can the Si'lat."

"Another lie," Khamis spat. "Si'lat, bring me the mirror."

The Si'lat bowed. There was a flash of light and a tiny square of reflective glass appeared in her hands. She gave it to Khamis, who scowled.

"What is this?" he asked shortly.

"The mirror," replied the Si'lat. "You did not specify beyond that, master."

Hajira smiled tightly beneath her veil, remembering her mother's words. *The Si'lat are powerful servants, but they do not serve willingly. It is necessary to weigh every word of every command, for if there is a way to twist what you say, the Si'lat will find it. And beware — if you ever order one to do the impossible, the spell that binds her will be broken.*

Khamis threw the glass away. "You know very well what I mean, Si'lat," he growled. "Take the mirror Hajira holds and —"

"Why are you bothering, Lazy Khamis?" Hajira interrupted before he could complete the command. "She can't do it. Your magic can't touch me, the Si'lat's magic can't touch me. You can't do anything to me as long as I wield my power and you can't take that from me unless you know my true name, the name on my mother's mirror."

Calling upon courage she didn't even know she possessed, Hajira stepped forward. "Perhaps I shall turn your limbs to stone and break them off one by one. Or perhaps I shall turn you into a locust and crush you from back to front. What do you think, Lazy Khamis?"

Khamis blanched and backed up a step. In desperation, he looked at Hajira, then the Si'lat. Hajira stepped forward again, holding the mirror out before her.

Think, you lazy fool. Think! she raged at him. *Show me the intelligence my mother saw in you and let me avenge her death so I may join her.*

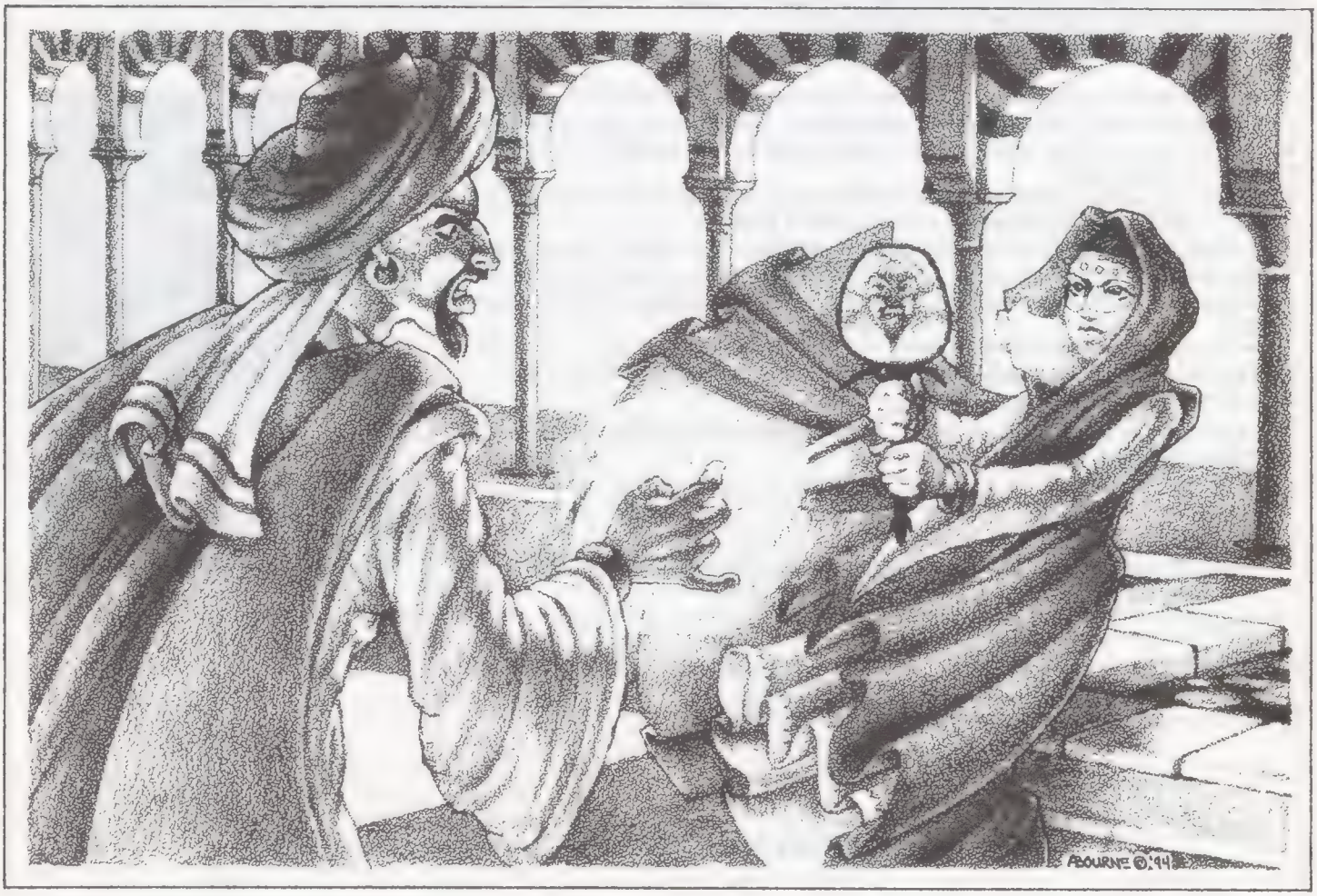
Khamis backed up another step, eyes fixed on the mirror. Then a wild look crossed his face. Hajira held her breath.

"Si'lat," he barked. "Tell me the name inscribed on the mirror Hajira holds."

Hajira snatched the mirror to her bosom. "No!" she cried.

"Fathia," the Si'lat said with a horrible grin.

Khamis laughed with mad exultation. "You see, Hajira? You aren't as smart as you think. I don't need your mirror — only your name." He threw his arms to the sky, still laughing his



Artwork by Adrian Bourne

hyena's laugh. Air whirled madly above him. "And now, Si'lat, take away her power — and give it to me!"

"No!" Hajira begged. "Khamis, please!"

"Take whose power, master?" the Si'lat asked politely.

"You *know* who I mean," Khamis screeched. "Give me Fathia's power and destroy her!"

The Si'lat laughed, a coarse, grating sound that raked Hajira's already raw nerves. "I am afraid, master, that you have asked the impossible." And a gout of flame roared from the Si'lat's hands. Khamis' wild howling turned into screams of agony that thinned and died as his body collapsed into ash.

"I. Am. *FREE!*" bellowed the Si'lat. More fire lashed down and melted the bottle. "My master is dead and I am free!"

Hajira swallowed and once again pushed aside her fear. *I'm coming, Mother.* "Then leave this place, foul and loathsome creature," she commanded.

The Si'lat turned a harsh burning gaze on her, then paused. "Yes," she hissed slowly. "I should kill you, shouldn't I, girl? It was your family that kept me imprisoned." Her eyes narrowed as she glanced almost idly about the garden with her burning eyes, then smiled at the heads strewn upon the ground like so many grains of rice. "But you did help free me and you are clever. Most clever. Perhaps the world would be a better place with you in it, mortal."

Hajira said nothing.

"Let this be a lesson to you, little one," the Si'lat said. "Being born with power is not always a blessing. It did not save your mother or sisters."

There was a clap of thunder and the Si'lat was gone. A gust of wind blew aside Hajira's veil and she automatically straightened it, even though there was no one to see her cheek did not carry the brand of sorceress. Hajira stared numbly about the once-beautiful gardens and at what remained of her family.

"But being born without power," said Hajira softly, "did prevent me from joining them."

Only then did the tears begin.

❄

STEVEN PIZIKS says that by the time this sees print he should have his degree(s) from Central Michigan University: a BA in German and Speech, and a BS in English and Health Education. He says he wrote this story in reaction after seeing Disney's *ALADDIN* and how far it strayed from its sources in Middle Eastern/Chinese mythology.

ADRIAN BOURNE moved recently to Seattle and shows his work at sf conventions across the country. He also does animation and illustration for computer games.

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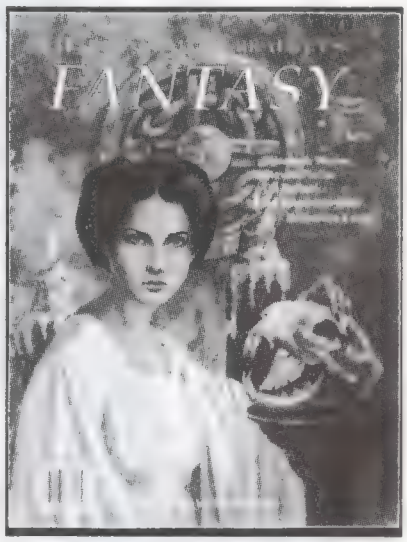

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Once Upon A Passion

by Devon Monk

Tess didn't like all the New-Age crystal-incense stuff, but there weren't many jobs out there for a witch.

She restacked the horoscope books and flipped the CD over. Love songs of the humpback whales poured out.

The door burst open. A woman stood in the doorway; golden hair cascaded down her pink full-length dress.

God. Another princess.

"You have to fix him," the princess whined.

"Witchcraft books are on the back wall."

"I don't want a book. Fix him." She stamped her jeweled slipper. "Now."

Tess sighed. Why did beautiful princesses always find the enchanted princes? "Put him on the counter."

The princess dumped her purse out. Tess was expecting a frog, or maybe a mouse, but instead a plump slug fell out with a plop.

Someone did a doozey of a curse this time. Maybe she should stop stocking

Artist: Dameon Willich

THE AMATEUR'S GUIDE TO CURSES AND LOVE SPELLS.

"Have you kissed him?"

The princess shuddered. "No!"

Tess took a deep breath, picked up the slug and gave it a smooch.

In a puff of smoke, a handsome prince appeared. He leaned over the counter, pulled Tess in his arms and kissed her passionately.

"What about me?" the princess whined.

Tess pointed to the opposite side of the shop. "Self improvement is over there."

*

DEVON MONK lives with her husband and two young sons in Oregon. She has previously sold small press and non-fiction works, but this is her first fantasy sale.

DAMEON WILLICH is another artist doing double-duty for us this issue... and he didn't have to do any dragons at all!

The Last Word

We keep shifting the cover stories around. Since C.J. Cherryh will be the Guest of Honor at Fantasy Worlds Festival in March 1995, and since that's at the beginning of March and we won't take an issue of the magazine to the printer till the *end* of March, that means that we have asked her for a story to publish in our December 1994 issue (so that guests will be able the buy the issue with her story in it, then ask her to sign the magazine, at the convention). FWF was a lot of fun last year, the kind of small, friendly convention you don't see too often any more, so please join us for the next one.

The cover story for the spring 1995 issue will be by Jo Clayton. We have a Tanya Huff story for summer 1995, and then another Jo Clayton story for fall 1995. Nick Jainschigg will be doing the covers for the Jo Clayton stories (in fact, one of the covers has already been delivered!), and Bob Eggleton is planning a knockout painting for the Tanya Huff story. Bob was stunned (but thrilled) to win the Hugo Award for Best Artist at the Winnipeg WorldCon.

Other authors you'll see featured in future issues include Nora Mulligan, C. Brochet, Rycke Foreman, Carl Thelen, Lisa Deason (whose story took third place in this issue's Cauldron), Vicki Martin, Harold Thompson, Edwina Mayer, Julia S. Mandala, Cynthia McQuillin, Laura J. Underwood, Carol E. Leever, Susan Jones, Ginger Strivelli, Mary Mannon Reeves, Phillip Wayne, Michael Mardis, and Kim Fryer.

Before the San Diego ComicCon and VikingCon this summer, we printed a test run of six MZBFM T-shirts, and they were a big hit at the conventions. Those were in black ink on cream-colored shirts; we decided that white ink on a black shirt would look better, and the shirts *needed* artwork. So George Barr has agreed to re-draw his famous "flying castle" from the cover of issue #1, in a form that will reproduce well on a T-shirt. We should have shirts printed by mid-October. The order form's on page 12. (And you won't have to pay $24 per shirt, either, like we did for the test batch.)

— Rachel E. Holmen

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The Cauldron — Issue #25

Story	Artist
❑ **The Masterpainter** by Diana L. Paxson	❑ Jill Bauman
❑ **The Witch's Familiar** by Linda Dunn	
❑ **Things Are Not Always...** by George Morrow	❑ Margaret Organ-Kean
❑ **The Spell Game by Jennifer Ashley**	❑ Gail Butler
❑ **What Dragons Prefer** by Dayle A. Dermatis	❑ Margaret Organ-Kean
❑ **Dreambreaker** by Wilda Gretzinger	❑ Lori Deitrick
❑ **Pennies for a Princess** by Ryan G. Van Cleave	❑ Elizabeth Hope Shaw
❑ **The Potion Maker** by Quinn Weller	❑ Dameon Willich
❑ **Away He Run** by Camille Allen LaGuire	❑ Bing Burnham
❑ **Firecrackers** by Tim Miller	❑ James Balkovek
❑ **One Summer** by Michael Johnson	❑ Allison Fiona Hershey
❑ **On the Holy Mountain** by Darrell Schweitzer	❑ George Barr
❑ **A Dragon on the Premises** by John P. Buentello	❑ George Barr
❑ **The Beginning of Tears** by Steven Piziks	❑ Adrian Bourne
❑ **Once Upon a Passion** by Devon Monk	❑ Dameon Willich

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Want a subscription? An order blank is on page 62. A back issue order form is on page 26.

New from DAW Books!

DANCE DOWN THE STARS: The Dancer Trilogy #3
by Jo Clayton

The Healer Serroi and her companions-in-arms forge deeper into the lands controlled by a mysterious foe with the ability to destroy her civilization. Can Serroi hope to defeat an enemy who can alter the very laws of life and death?

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DEALS WITH THE DEVIL
edited by Mike Resnick, Martin H. Greenberg, and Loren Estleman

In the thirty-two new stories presented here, writers such as Jack Haldeman, Mercedes Lackey, and Larry Dixon take up the challenge of making and then doing their best to break those all too treacherous *Deals with the Devil.*

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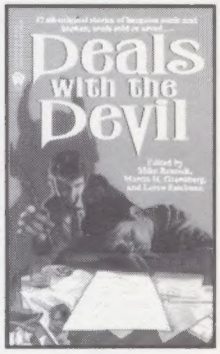
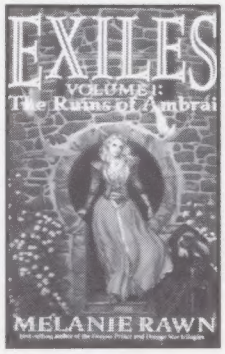


EXILES, Volume I: The Ruins of Ambrai
by Melanie Rawn

Torn apart in childhood by the maneuverings and ambitions of their elders and raised to take their stands on opposing sides of a conflict between two powerful schools of magic, three Mageborn sisters now find themselves forced into a war which could put an end to all practitioners of magic in their world.

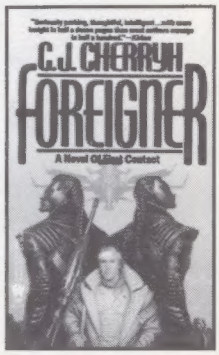
0-88677-619-8 **Fantasy** **$20.95/$26.99 in Canada** **Nov. 1994**



FOREIGNER
by C.J. Cherryh

On the planet of the *atevi*, humans have traded their advanced technology for a solitary island refuge. Then the sole human allowed into *atevi* society is marked for an assassin's bullet. An isolated lunatic? Or the consequence of one human's fondness for a species which has fourteen words for betrayal and not a single word for love?

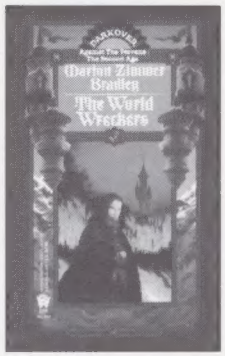
0-88677-637-6 **SF** **$5.99/$6.99 in Canada** **Nov. 1994**



THE WORLD WRECKERS
by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Worldwreckers, Inc. For a fee, its agents would enter any world, and do enough damage so the natives would be forced to allow Terran investors to step in and salvage their planet. And now, the assignment has been given to infiltrate Cottman IV...a planet otherwise known as Darkover.

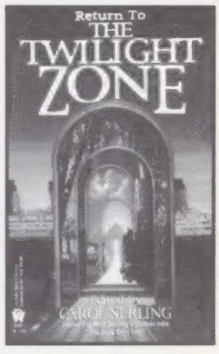
0-88677-629-5 **Fantasy** **$4.99/$5.99 in Canada** **Nov. 1994**



RETURN TO THE TWILIGHT ZONE
edited by Carol Serling

Carol Serling has once more called upon many of today's hottest writers to create the kind of imagination-grabbing stories with that unique twist that are the trademark of *The Twilight Zone.* Includes a classic tale by Rod Serling himself!

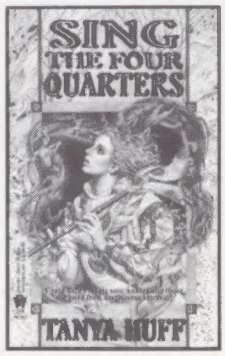
0-88677-576-0 **Fiction** **$4.99/$5.99 in Canada** **Dec. 1994**



SING THE FOUR QUARTERS
by Tanya Huff

For Princess Annice, who could bring forth the elemental spirits from each of the four quarters, the call of magic was too strong to be denied, even it it meant renouncing her royal blood, and becoming a fugitive in her own land.

0-88677-628-7 **Fantasy** **$4.99/$5.99 in Canada** **Dec. 1994**



THE GLASS DRAGON
by Irene Radford

Within a realm which has always been protected by its magicians, and in a kingdom whose ruler's own life is intricately linked with that of the dragons, the disappearance of these magical beasts could see the land fall to invaders.

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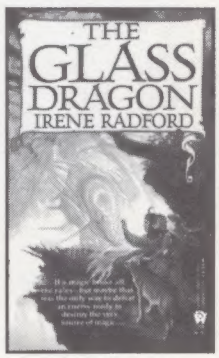

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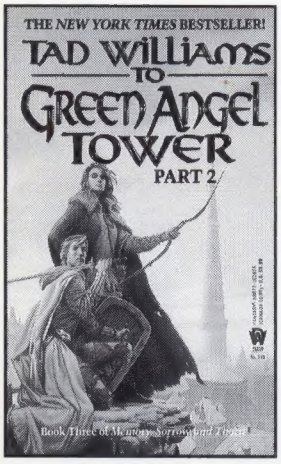

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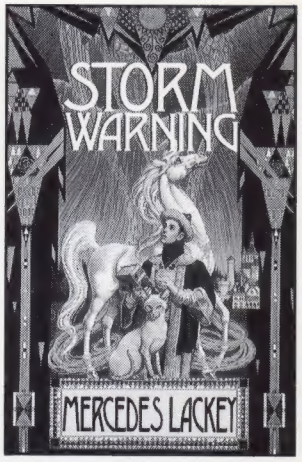

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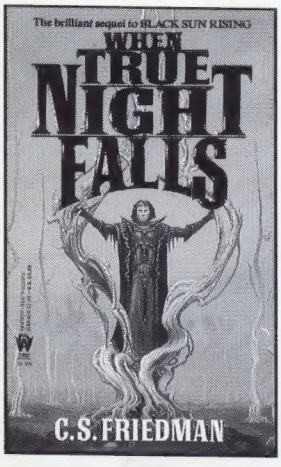

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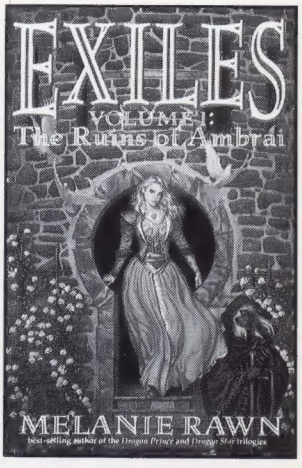

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